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LADY LOWATER'S COMPANION.

VOL. II.

LADY LOWATER'S COMPANION

BY

THE AUTHOR OF

"ST. OLAVE'S," "JANITA'S CROSS," "ANNETTE,"

"THE SENIOR SONGMAN,"

&c., &c.

'This is the condition of the battle, which man
that is born upon the earth shall fight; that if he be
overcome, he shall suffer.'—*Esdra.*

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. II.

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LADY LOWATER'S COMPANION.

CHAPTER I.

As might have been expected, Mrs. Antony made no objection when, a day or two after that dinner-party, Lady Lowater wrote a civil note to her, asking if Miss Dormer might be spared for a short visit to the Court, before returning to her hospital duties at Hurchester.

Valence herself did not seem particularly triumphant about it.

‘I will do just as you like, mamma,’ she said, when Mrs. Antony told her the contents of the note. ‘If Lady Lowater

thinks I can be of use to Margaret Dyson, it is all right; but I know my hospital work, and I am ready to go back to it at any time.'

'You had better stay, Valence,' said Mrs. Antony, carefully examining the Lowater crest, and testing between her finger and thumb the fine thick quality of the Lowater note-paper. 'It is always better to keep in, when we can, with people above us in station.'

Valence bit her lip. She was too much accustomed to this kind of thing.

'If that was all, mamma, I would go back to Hurchester to-morrow. Lady Lowater can do nothing for me that I am not able to do for myself.'

'Valence, my dear, you are so stupid in these little social matters. Why, it is a chance you may never have again in your life. Lady Lowater has evidently taken

a fancy to you, and there is no telling what may come of it. If you make yourself useful, you may stay there for weeks. Only fancy what an introduction for you, • • 'To what, mamma?'

'To society, of course. Lady Lowater visits with all the county people, and, whilst you are her guest, you will get amongst them too. Your position will be made for life.'

'I don't care the least bit, mamma, for any advantage that may come to me through staying at Lowater Court. I am

lady as it is; at least, I hope so, and I am a good nurse. I know that, without being told, and I take my position upon those two facts. All the rest is of very little consequence. But if I can do any good to Dyson's daughter, and if, as Lady Lowater was saying the other night, I can be of use in training some young

women here, I am quite ready to stay.

‘Very well, Valence. Then stay on that account. At any rate, it is my wish that you *should* stay. Lady Lowater has been so excessively kind, and her intimacy may be so useful both to Mr. Antony and myself, that it would be most foolish not to accept the invitation. It is important that you should meet her wishes in every way.’

‘All right, mamma, then I will go. But why were *you* not willing to meet her wishes by going to see poor Margaret Dyson? I am sure Lady Lowater mentioned it more than once, and so did Miss Pentwistle.’

Mrs. Antony looked annoyed. Valence was sometimes quite too direct in her questionings. That tiresome old woodman and his daughter! If they had but lived in any other part of the country.

She drew herself up with the air of a person who is misunderstood.

‘My dear, you must allow me to be the best judge of my own feelings. I told Lady Lowater that the sight of hopeless suffering always unnerved me so that I found it utterly useless to visit such cases, and therefore she must kindly not press the subject. I intimated my willingness to send soup or anything of that sort. Besides, if you are going to take up the nursing of her, there is no necessity for me to interfere.’

‘Oh! no, mamma, only that Lady Lowater seemed to wish it so much.’

‘That was before it was arranged for you to attend to her. I consider that I have quite done my duty now in sparing you to give up your whole time to the case.’

‘But, mamma, if you want me at home,

I would just as soon stay here, and go to the cottage every day, as stay at the Court and go from there.'

'Not on any account, Valence,' said Mrs. Antony, with decision—'not on *any* account. The whole thing is settled. I shall accept Lady Lowater's invitation for you immediately, and say how gladly I give up my claims upon you, for the sake of ministering comfort to others. It is, as I said, a most unlooked-for opening, and if you play your—I mean, if you make proper use of your advantages, there is no telling——'

'Oh! never mind all that sort of thing, mamma. I understand what you are going to say about it. If I go to Lady Lowater at all, I go to be useful to her, and not to be useful to myself. Now it is done with.'

And Valence turned away, with that

feeling of emptiness which always oppressed her after any conversation with her mother touching social matters. Their ways of looking at things were so entirely apart. The bond which united them was one that had so little of the spiritual element in it. A home they had in common, but not now anything else—not even a name.

Not even a name. Valence knew very well that ever since her own father had died, five years before, her mother had been desirous of a third marriage; and, ever since that marriage had been arranged, a husband for herself had been the most important thing. Indeed, for Mrs. Antony, a husband of some sort was the only condition under which life was worth living. That a girl could seek out her own work, and, finding it, be content with it, was a state of mind utterly unin-

telligible to her; but, if Valence chose that as her portion, she must take the consequence—that consequence being a home of her own making and providing somewhere else.

And so Mrs. Antony had intimated to her daughter only a few days before, that she might consider herself at liberty to return to Hurchester at any time. Mr. Antony, of course, could not be expected to provide a maintenance for her, and, now that the wedding calls were over, the sooner a final arrangement was made the better.

But circumstances alter cases. Lady Lowater's interest in Valence was a thing to be cultivated at any price. And, if the interest had been manifested without the invitation, Mrs. Antony would have seen it her duty, even in opposition to her husband's wishes, to keep Valence with her

for an indefinite time, in order that an intimacy between the Court and the Elms might be established. Now, however, Lady Lowater's note had settled all that. Valence was to be disposed of, and at such an advantage, too.

It was no secret that Sir Merrion was coming home almost immediately. People said that he was coming home to look for a wife. Conquest was almost sure to fall to the lady who was first in the field, especially with such opportunities as anyone would have when staying in the same house. And though the capture of a baronet was a lofty flight for middle-class ambition to take, still Mrs. Antony had done well enough for herself to encourage her in hoping to do better still for her daughter.

The sooner Valence was settled the better. The solicitor's wife had a difficult

game to play. She knew that very well when she married Mr. Antony and came to live in the immediate neighbourhood of Lowater Court, where, as Libbie Dyson, she had performed the duties of scullery-girl during the early married life of the present Lady Lowater. Her father, cutting and cleaving timber on the estate, bringing home his weekly fifteen shillings for Margaret to keep house with as best she might, had long ago lost sight of the pretty daughter who was sent away from the overmuch sunshine of old Sir Guy Lowater's attentions. She had done well for herself since then. She began by marrying the young doctor in the house to which she had gone as maid-of-all-work, he first sending her to school for six months for improvement in writing, behaviour, and spelling. Libbie had plenty of tact and observation. She soon picked up the

manners of her new surroundings. She had also a convenient bluntness of sensibility which was not wounded by any little slights she might receive. She had made a good start already. She might do better as her husband rose in his profession; and she could afford to take a snub now and then, so long as she learned something by it. And so well she looked about her, and so admirably she profited by her husband's instructions and the admonitions of society, that, twelve months after her marriage, people had almost forgotten to ask who she was and whence she came.

Then the young doctor died. But Libbie's good fortune did not die with him. She buried him, went into mourning for him, the crape suiting her fair complexion so well that, before she had been a widow eight months, she was engaged to Frederic Dormer, a young lieutenant who came to

lodge in the neat little villa which she had taken and furnished on the occasion of her first bereavement.

He was a frank, warm-hearted, affectionate young man, fond of pleasure, but with no vices about him; just the one to be captured by a pretty face and a pleasing manner, especially when the owner of these advantages possessed, in addition, that experience of mankind which a previous marriage bestowed.

So the woodman's daughter entered the matrimonial estate a second time, and again commenced her upward career. In the course of a few years Mr. Dormer's regiment was ordered to the East. The young subaltern developed into a captain. As an officer's wife on a foreign station, Mrs. Dormer saw society under a different aspect, and studied a certain style, both in dress and manner, which was a decided

improvement upon anything she had been able to achieve during her first marriage. Indeed, she made such good use of her opportunities that when Captain Dormer's health failed, and he came home on half-pay, she was able to establish herself in quite a fashionable position in Hurchester, any little extravagances of expression or deportment, which people occasionally detected in her, being set down to a long residence abroad where ladies, as a rule, were not so strait-laced as at home.

Valence was their only child, and, when very young, she was sent to Germany to be educated, so that she never knew very much of her parents until her own character was formed. She was still working industriously at Brussels, when her father's failing health made her determine to do something for her own living; and so, before she came home at all, she went

into one of the hospitals there, and trained as a nurse for three years, bringing with her, when she did join her parents at Hurchester, such credentials as would secure her employment whenever she needed it.

At forty Mrs. Dormer was again a widow, almost as pretty as ever, and quite as fascinating in crape and black cashmere. This time there was no need to take a little villa, and fit it up for the reception of lodgers, her pension and the small property left by Captain Dormer being sufficient, with what Valence made by her profession, to keep up an elegant appearance. By no means crushed under the burden of her second bereavement, Mrs. Dormer proclaimed by a thousand pretty coquetries, even before her crape wanted turning, that life had not lost all its attractions; and, by the time the

crape *had* been turned, memory had quite given way to wise provisions for the future. That future, she was sure, might have been brightened over and over again by the promise of a third marriage, had not the grown-up daughter stood in the way ; and, accordingly, no objection was made when Valence proposed to accept the position of in-door nurse at the Hurchester Hospital.

She had been there two or three years when Thoresby Antony, Esq., of the Elms, Lowater, near Byborough, came upon the scene. Business brought him to Hurchester. A mutual friend introduced him to Mrs. Dormer. He had been long looking for a lady of good looks, good breeding, and good manners to give his new house its finishing touch. All these advantages he found, or thought he found, concentrated in the person of the captain's

widow. If a little money had gone with them, it would have been all the better, but Mrs. Dormer wisely avoided the mention of pecuniary matters until the lawyer was sufficiently enamoured to be foolish enough to cast them aside and to take her for what she was in herself.

Thus it came to pass that, four or five years after her second widowhood, Libbie became mistress of that pretty house on the Byborough Road, not a mile away from Lowater Court.

Rather a risky position, and one which called for any amount of tact and prudence to keep it from developing into a very dangerous one. But Libbie, or, as she preferred to be called now, Bettina, had confidence in herself. Five and twenty years of steady advancement upon the social ladder had placed a sufficient distance between her present self and the

rosy-cheeked scullery-girl upon whom Sir Guy had cast admiring glances as she sat, amongst the rest of the Court domestics, in the north aisle of Lowater Church. There was the fair face still, the comely plumpness, the abundant blonde hair, which showed to equal advantage under widow's veiling or bridal tulle; but the pretty pertness, which had rendered her dangerous to the peace of my lady, had been toned down into the *savoir-faire* of a woman of the world; and that quickness of perception, that rapidity of execution which had made her get through her scullery-work with an ease surpassing that of any other scourer of pans and dishes, had been turned into the more useful channel of self-promotion. Bettina could hit upon the readiest mode of securing a desirable acquaintance, just as in days gone by no kitchen-maid could equal her in the swift

accomplishment of her duties at the sink. And that feminine taste and skill which could at once pick out a right shade of ribbon from the pedler's basket, and twist it up into a bow so pretty as to turn the heads of the village louts next Sunday at church, had gone on improving itself by experience until, whether wife, widow, or bride, old Ben Dyson's daughter contrived to be the best dressed woman of any social circle to which she could gain admission. And, as for manners, she was acute enough to have found out long ago that, if face and draperies were above criticism, such miscellaneous graces as she had been able to gather up by careful observation of other people were quite sufficient to float her over the sand-bar of public opinion.

CHAPTER II.

FORTUNATELY also for Mrs. Antony, Valence was not one of those girls who exactly reproduce their mother's bloom of youth. Not a single line or curve of Miss Dormer's face, not an unconscious habit, gesture, or peculiarity, could recall Libbie Dyson to anyone who had known that exceedingly clever young person in the days of her youth. Such a share of good looks as Valence possessed at all had come to her through her father. She had his clear, dark skin, his brown eyes, his brown hair. She had his frankness too, and his very decided manner of attacking

anything which he was minded to accomplish, though fortunately she had imbibed from her mother so much prudence as held her to the attacking and accomplishing of something worth the pains spent upon it. There was this very noticeable difference, however, between the mother's prudence and the daughter's, that Mrs. Antony's was invariably exercised for its own purposes, and Valence Dormer's for the use of other people.

In the opinion of most, the elder lady was the more fascinating of the two. Those who wished to flatter Mrs. Antony, said that no one could have taken them for mother and daughter. Those who were spiteful to her, said behind her back that she had brought Miss Dormer to the Elms on purpose to act as a foil to her own superior grace and elegance. And those who watched the exceedingly caseful man-

ner in which she allowed her things to be picked up for her in church, said that probably a grown-up daughter would be very useful by-and-by, to do all the little odds-and-ends of service which the most devoted of husbands could not be expected to perform for very long, even for such a wife as Mrs. Antony.

‘Don’t you think if you said a fortnight?’ Miss Pentwistle had suggested, as Lady Lowater sat at her little table in the library, writing that note of invitation. ‘I always think, when you are asking anyone in that way, it is so much safer to give some idea of the time over which you wish the visit to extend. Miss Dormer herself might feel more comfortable to have something as a guide.’

‘That depends,’ said Lady Lowater.

And it might be by accident, or it might be of set purpose, that, as she said it, her

eyes rested on the portrait of young Sir Merrion which hung at the other end of the room.

Miss Pentwistle noticed the look.

'Depends, upon what, dear Lady Lowater?'

'Oh! many things. One cannot always make definite arrangements. One must let things follow their own course.'

'Exactly. But I should say, if it depends upon Mrs. Antony, the visit will probably be a long one. She is a remarkably clever woman.'

Lady Lowater raised her handsome eyebrows.

'Have you found that out? You said she was fascinating, but I did not know you had discovered her cleverness.'

'I have discovered both, Lady Lowater. If she had not been as managing as a member of the cabinet, she could never,

without a penny of fortune worth calling by the name, and with a grown-up daughter almost entirely dependent upon her, have married Mr. Antony. He is the very last man to take up with poverty, unless that poverty were allied with something that made him forget all about it.'

'The fascination did that, Miss Pentwistle, of course. And then, you know, he married to raise his position. Until a man gets a wife, he counts for nothing. And Mrs. Antony is supposed to have good connections, though, if they do not rest upon a better foundation than the pedigree implied by the Queen Anne inkstand, I am sorry for him. But why have you turned against her so? You began by being ready to bow down and worship her.'

Oh! no, Lady Lowater, not *her*, but her clothes. I always did say, and I say

now, that she dresses to perfection. But she dropped me entirely as soon as she found that you were ready to pay her a little attention. I believe you will find that all she cares about is her own advancement, and to secure it she will descend to any amount of meanness.'

'Clever, unscrupulous, selfish, and fascinating, Miss Pentwistle! What a serpent has coiled itself up in our innocent little midst! But, if she is as bad as this, there is the more need that Miss Downer should have the opportunity of breathing a more wholesome moral atmosphere. And what can be more wholesome than that which surrounds our two selves?' So I shall ask her to come for as long as she can be spared from her hospital work.'

Miss Pentwistle gave a little hopeless sigh. Some people were so deaf to reason.

'In that case, you may depend upon it

the visit will be a long one. Mrs. Antony will take good care that the lady superintendent's wishes do not stand in the way of Miss Dormer's advancement. And, if it ends in her giving up the hospital altogether, well, that will only be an excuse for more demands upon you. However, I beg your pardon. Perhaps I ought not to have said so much.'

Lady Lowater closed her note.

••'Do not trouble yourself; it does not make any difference. You say what you like, and I do what I like, so that, you see, we ought both to be satisfied. I have asked Miss Dormer to come next week—Monday, if possible. Let me see. This is Friday. You will give orders for the little west-room to be got ready.'

'I will. Most likely she will prefer that to the great guest-room.'

'Yes, and I wish to have her near me.'

Miss Pentwistle knitted on in silence until eleven o'clock. Then the postman came. He was always late at Lowater Court, because he had to walk up from the Cove, that impertinent little watering-place having intercepted the mail bags, which would otherwise have been carried direct from Byborough to the village. There was a foreign letter—one from Sir Merrion, as Miss Pentwistle knew very well, for his letters generally came on Friday mornings. And it was to say that, by the time Lady Lowater read it, he would in all probability be nearing English ground, he having taken his passage in the *Ariadne*, a steamer sailing only a day or two after his letter was posted.

'I am so delighted for you, dear Lady Lowater. I know so well what a treat it will be for you to have Sir Merrion home again. It only seems a pity that there

should be another guest in the house, because you must want to have him all to yourself just at first. There will be so many things both to hear and tell, and he will be as anxious as yourself for a long quiet time together. But the note has not been sent yet. Do you think it might be as well to defer Miss Dormer's coming for a few days—until you get settled down, you know?’

•• No, let things remain as they are. One can never tell when those ships get in. Miss Dormer had better come first, and get settled down herself, and then she will not feel, when Merriam comes, that I am neglecting her. She will have got a little used to the place.’

All pointing to an indefinitely long stay, thought Miss Pentwistle, despairingly, as she folded up her knitting and went to tell the housekeeper which rooms were to

be prepared. And of course, when Mrs. Antony knew that the young baronet was actually at Lowater Court, she would leave no stone unturned to get her daughter's visit lengthened out to the extremest limits of propriety. Scheming, contriving, unscrupulous woman that she was! Miss Pentwistle only wished she dare tell Lady Lowater exactly what she thought about her. She believed, if the woman was not spreading a net for Sir Merriam himself, she was spreading it for Lady Lowater, working things round so that her ladyship might be induced to keep Valence Dormer permanently at the Court, under pretence of nursing a few sick people in the village. And then what would become of her, Miss Pentwistle? Of course she would not be wanted any longer. Such meanness! Envy—that was it; envy, hatred, and malice.

For Miss Pentwistle had not been able to keep from letting Mrs. Antony know that she had found out about the Queen Anne inkstand. She had met the solicitor's wife the very morning after that call upon Mrs. Petipase, and in the most lady-like and apparently innocent manner had given her to understand that she knew how it had come into the family.

It had not been difficult to bring the conversation round to the right point. Just a remark or two about Mrs. Cottam and the interesting old shops in Hurchester, where all manner of curiosities could be purchased, and a guileful little hint about suitable things for wedding presents, and a pause, and then a reference, apparently quite accidental, to the delightful Queen Anne possession. And a conscious look in Mrs. Antony's face, and a certain change in the tone of her voice, betrayed

that she knew, and that she knew that Miss Pentwistle knew that she knew.

After that they were enemies, though as polite as possible to each other. Miss Pentwistle should have remembered that contingency before she allowed herself the very warrantable little triumph of saying what she knew. Mrs. Antony would have been more than mortal if she could have accepted such a cruel thrust and treated the giver of it with anything like Christian forbearance. Miss Pentwistle knew what she would have done under similar circumstances. She would never have rested until she had paid her enemy out. And Mrs. Antony was not a better woman than herself. Therefore Mrs. Antony would want to pay *her* out. And how could she do it better than by supplanting her at Lowater Court by a bright, sensible cheerful young girl, who, if not successful

in making a conquest of Sir Merrion himself, might at any rate secure the companionship, and the salary, and all the advantages of an unexceptionable position, with nothing in the world to do for it, so long as she could be content with a quiet life?

Miss Pentwistle thought she understood it all, and dark was her brow, and darker were her reflections, as, having given orders about the guest-chamber and the little west-room, she set out for a round of visits amongst the poor people of the village.

CHAPTER III.

SHE had intended to begin her round with Margaret Dyson, but, seeing Miss Dormer in the distance turning into the lane which led to the woodman's cottage, she changed her mind, and went, instead, towards the church.

Close to it she met Mr. Rock, evidently making parochial visits too. An insignificant sort of little man, Miss Pentwistle always thought, when she happened to come across him, with ninety-seven pounds ten a year stamped as plainly upon his clothes as if anyone had written it there for him. One had a certain pity for a

man who had been content with such a stipend for more than ten years; who had scarcely ever been known to be asked to preach in other pulpits; who never made speeches at public meetings, never lectured before Young Men's Associations, never did anything, in short, but keep himself out of debt and out of quarrels, and go about with unclerical freedom amongst the poor people.

Miss Pentwistle thought Mr. Rock was tolerably well aware of her state of mind towards him, for he never seemed to care very much to meet her in the village. If he did happen to catch sight of her in the distance, ten to one but he turned down a lane or into a cottage before he came near enough to say good morning. And she generally allowed him to escape in that manner, unless he had been saying something in his sermons which required comment.

Then she invariably stopped him, or lay in wait until he came out of his hiding-place, and then pounced down upon him and never let him escape until she had said all that was on her mind. What did one make oneself useful in the parish for, if one could not air one's opinions from time to time in a friendly way, especially to a man who was very unceremonious in expressing his own?

But Mr. Rock did not seem anxious to avoid her this time. Instead, he bore down upon her with quite unusual cheerfulness.

'Good morning, Miss Pentwistle,' he said, as soon as they were within speaking distance. 'I was just on my way to the Court. I have been down to the Cove this morning, and I met an old fisherman from Cray Head, and he says the *Ariadne* was sighted off the Head yesterday. I wanted to be the first to take the news to Lady

Lowater. It will not be in the papers perhaps until to-morrow.

Miss Pentwistle looked as pleasant as she could. Everything was happening wrongly, but still one must seem to be quite satisfied.

'You don't say so! Dear me! how delighted Lady Lowater will be. I know she did not expect him home for a week, or even more. You see these vessels that do not carry the mails are so very uncertain. When do you suppose he can really arrive at the Court?'

'Sunday night perhaps, if they make a good run up the Channel. Or Monday morning at the latest. But Lady Lowater is sure to have a telegram. I only thought that I should like to tell her that she might expect one any time now.'

'I am sure she will be very much obliged to you. Sir Merrion is coming home for

a long furlough this time, is he not?

'You are more likely to know that than I am, Miss Pentwistle. I have never asked Lady Lowater anything about it. I only hope, whether it is long or short, it will be very happy for both of them. I wish Sir Merrion could make up his mind to live upon the estate altogether.'

'Well, yes, perhaps,' said Miss Pentwistle, with a considerable reservation of doubt in her voice. And then, seeing that Mr. Rock was about to pass on, she continued:

'There was a little matter I wanted to speak to you about, if you are not in a great hurry.—Margaret Dyson. Of course, you know that she is not expected to recover.'

Miss Pentwistle said this with a slight air of reproach, as if she were giving the curate information upon a subject concerning which his knowledge ought to

have been better than her own. But Mr. Rock only replied, quietly,

'I have been aware of that for some time. No one can visit Margaret from week to week, without seeing that the end cannot be far off now.'

Miss Pentwistle's voice did not lose its accent of reproach, but mingled dignity with that reproach as she said,

'You do understand. That is satisfactory. I was under the impression that perhaps you might be buoying her up with hopes of recovery. And that would be such false kindness, such very false kindness, Mr. Rock. I think one never makes a greater mistake than in hiding their condition from dying people.'

'I think so too, Miss Pentwistle.'

And Mr. Rock's hand was already on its way to his hat, with intent to raise it in sign of farewell. But he was not to escape.

'If you are in haste,' said the lady, 'I will turn and walk a little way with you towards the town. I shall still have time to finish my round amongst the cottages. There are no special cases on hand to demand lengthy conversation just now, and I feel it my duty to have a few words with you about poor Dyson's daughter.'

Mr. Rock's hand came down, more slowly than it had gone up. With a half sigh he resigned himself to the situation. Stepping aside, that Miss Pentwistle might have the narrow footpath all to herself, he measured his steps with hers and prepared for a lecture.

'I am very glad to hear you say,' she continued, 'that you consider it a mistake to deceive people, in her condition, as to their chances of recovery. I daresay you know that Lady Lowater has asked Miss Dormer to come to the Court for a few

days, in order that she may nurse the poor woman and make things more comfortable for her.'

'Yes,' said Mr. Rock. 'I believe Miss Dormer has been to the cottage every day for the last fortnight. I have met her there several times.'

A door of hope, quite apart from anything connected with Margaret Dyson's temporal or spiritual interests, opened in Miss Pentwistle's mind. If only the perpetual curate and Mrs. Antony's daughter could be made to see things in the same light, what a relief it would be from the complications which were arising at the Court. The girl was exactly cut out for the wife of a clergyman with a nominal stipend. She was cheerful, strong, not fond of dress, a good nurse, not foolishly sensitive about appearances. Mr. Rock could not do better than turn his thoughts

in that direction. And though, in manner of expressing herself upon religious subjects, the young lady was almost as unsatisfactory as the curate himself, still, when one considered the difficulties which would be cleared out of the way by an engagement between them, that stumbling-block might be passed over. Miss Pentwistle thought she could remove it herself by-and-by. She had a gift, and she knew it, for conversation on theological subjects. And, when she had a serious purpose in view, the thistle-down of instruction might be imparted in such a manner as to be neither brushed nor blown away.

‘You have met Miss Dormer,’ she said. ‘Ah! I am very glad. Then you know how kind and good and self-denying she is. I am so glad to think that Margaret Dyson is going to have the benefit of her skill. If we could but keep her in the parish, she

would be invaluable amongst the poor people. I do wish you would use your efforts to persuade her to settle here. Lady Lowater was saying only the other day, what a good thing it would be if she could remain here until she had trained some young women for sick-nursing. I say she had better stay altogether. We need such workers in the parish.'

Mr. Rock made no reply, only hurried his pace a little. Miss Pentwistle felt she must get on and say what she had to say about Dyson's daughter. The other seed had been sown. One must give it time to settle in the ground.

'I will not keep you very long,' she said, not making any attempt to hurry with him, so that he was obliged, for politeness sake, to fall back to her own pace, 'but I must tell you what I had to say about Margaret Dyson. I do not know

what you may think about it, but I always feel it my duty to speak to her as to one who is standing on the brink of another world. Indeed, her father says she generally seems very quiet and depressed after my visits ; conviction, you know, and a clear proof to me that my words have had the desired effect. Now, I have no doubt that whatever *you* say is said with the best of motives, but I hope you will excuse me for suggesting that it is sometimes not quite suitable for a person in her circumstances. I happened to go in once just after you had left, and I found her almost in what I might call a condition of inerriment. You had been telling her, she said, some amusing story that you had heard down at the Cove. I must say I felt shocked to hear how she laughed.

‘Must you?’ replied Mr. Rock, with something very like a laugh shining in

his brown eyes, though all the rest of his face was grave enough. 'Then I must say that you and I think differently about these matters. Now, when I hear an amusing story, or when my little dog Trap has been doing anything unusually funny, or Margaret's magpie that hangs at the door behaves to me too much like a meddling human creature, I always tell the poor woman about it as soon as ever I can. I think she needs, more than most other people, something to brighten her up

Miss Pentwistle looked severe.

'Mr. Rock, Margaret Dyson needs nothing that is calculated to take off her mind for a moment from eternal realities.'

'Very well. And will you tell me what you think *are* eternal realities?'

'He wants to argue, does he?' thought Miss Pentwistle. 'All right, he will find no lack of ability in his opponent, at any

rate.' And she tightened her shawl round her, and said, slowly and decisively, as a bishop's chaplain might be supposed to speak to a young candidate who has been guilty of levity in his replies to examination questions,

'Mr. Rock, dogs and magpies are not eternal realities.'

The curate's reply was astounding.

'There may be a difference of opinion about that, Miss Pentwistle, especially as regards the dogs. Some people think that any creature who can love and look up with reverence to, and deny its lower instincts for, a being above it, has in it something, call it soul or call it what you will, which cannot perish. I believe that people who think so are not fools. As to magpies, you may have the benefit of the doubt. It seems to me that a creature that can *only* talk, may be a reality enough

whilst it is performing that function; but let us hope, for our own comfort's sake, that the reality will not be eternal.'

Was the man joking, or what was he doing? This was more unintelligible than anything to which Miss Pentwistle had ever heard him give utterance in the pulpit. But he went on.

'Will you tell me now, what *are* eternal realities? You have told me what you think are not.'

'Mr. Rock, eternal realities are subjects connected with the unseen world. It is upon *them* that a person in Margaret Dyson's state should be encouraged to meditate.'

'Exactly. I quite think with you there. And what *are* subjects connected with the unseen world? Tell me some of them, and I will tell you some others.'

This was too much. Miss Pentwistle felt

herself like a Sunday-schooler being put through the catechism. She almost wished she had let the curate go on as fast as he liked to Lady Lowater, and tell her about the telegram. But he must be kept in his place.

'Mr. Rock,' she said, with an air of dignity, 'our conversation is straying from the point. We had better drop it.'

'Not at all, Miss Pentwistle. 'I think we have got the point very well in hand, and I don't want to drop the conversation at all, just yet. I want to know what you consider eternal realities. You have told me what they are not. Now tell me what they are.'

Miss Pentwistle felt indignant. But that was not all. She felt uncomfortable. When she came to look at her ideas, they were chiefly negative. At the same time she was sure they had a value of their own,

if she could only have set them forth properly in words. She had never found any difficulty in doing that before, for instance when talking to Dyson and his daughter, and the Sunday-school children; but somehow what had been enough for them did not seem to serve her purpose now. This obstinate little perpetual curate was getting her up into a corner. She attempted to get out of it by generalities.

'It is not easy, Mr. Rock,' she began, 'to put these great subjects into words.'

'You are quite right, Miss Pentwistle, it is not. But you say you always talk to Margaret Dyson about them, and you must be able to put them into words then.'

More up in the corner than ever. And Mr. Rock evidently knew it. He kept pushing at her in his quiet, persistent way.

'If you can only tell me exactly what

you say to her, I shall be able to form an idea of your opinions. And they might be of great value to me.'

Miss Pentwistle was sure of that, if only she could get them said. Only the more she tried to say them, the more inappropriate they seemed to the present necessity. She gave a desperate mental fling, and jumped out of the corner by saying,

'It is good of you, I am sure, to suggest that any remarks of mine could be profitable. I think I may allow, without any self-praise, that I have given more than the usual amount of attention to these subjects, but at the same time I have such a feeling of their importance that I do not like to enter upon them without preparation. I would rather appoint an interview with you at some future time, when——'

'Yes, only you see there may not be very

much future time for the appointment,' persisted the obnoxious curate. 'If your opinions are to be of any use to me in dealing with Margaret, the sooner you give me the benefit of them the better. Do you happen to have kept any notes of your conversations? I think I understood once that you have a book for the purpose of entering matters of interest of that kind, and, judging from my own experience, much that she says is well worth remembering. And of course, in noting it down, you must of necessity write what you say yourself in order to carry out the train of thought.'

Miss Pentwistle felt that consistency obliged her to say something. Within the last couple of months she had given Margaret Dyson at least the length of a score of homilies on the subject of eternal realities; yet now, when she was asked to furnish Mr. Rock with the gist of them, she found

herself brought to a dead standstill. Want of words she could not plead, because if she could talk to Margaret, why could she not talk to the curate? Indeed she ought to have been able to talk to him with more ease, since he, being an educated man, could better measure the platform of intellectual superiority from which she viewed the subject. She replied, rather helplessly, being very sorry that she had turned back with Mr. Rock at all,

‘I think I must ask you to excuse me for the present. I will look over a few heads which I gathered together in my note-book, for use amongst the poor, and go through the matter seriously with you at a future opportunity. I am afraid I ought to be turning back to the cottages. You see, Lady Lowater likes me to take a stroll with her in the grounds before tea, and my visits *must* be made this afternoon.’

But Miss Pentwistle was not to escape. She had asked the fly to walk into her parlour, intending to wind him up and make a feast of him. But the fly had turned out to be a most solid and impracticable beetle, who could not only cut through all her webs with those pitiless mandibles of his, but could turn herself, the spider, out bodily, and take possession of the parlour on his own account.

‘All right, Miss Pentwistle. I shall be very glad to have the conversation when you are ready for it, but there is no need for you to hurry away. You know I am on my way to see Lady Lowater, and, after what I have to tell her, I am sure she will not feel lonely, even if she has to spend the rest of the afternoon by herself. I understand you to imply that Margaret is suffering from my want of faithfulness in not pressing home upon her, as you say, eternal

realities. And, as you know exactly what ought to be said, you are in duty bound to tell me.'

'Oh! not want of faithfulness, Mr. Rock,' said the unfortunate spider, vainly endeavouring to tidy up her broken web. 'I am sure you are a most faithful pastor, according to your light.'

'Or rather according to my want of it. Is not that what you mean? But at any rate you see I am willing to receive more, if you can give it me.'

That opened a fresh track. Miss Pentwistle could speak more freely, and she felt it her duty to do so.

'Mr. Rock,' she said, impressively, 'it is not for me to give you that which can only come from above. I have no doubt you know, as well as I do, where to look for the supplies which are so necessary to

anyone placed in your position. I am a poor creature.

Mr. Rock looked at her, and a half amused expression again played about the corners of his mouth. Perhaps he was not inclined to contradict the latter part of her statement. At any rate he let it pass. But, seeing that she was not bent upon turning back, he paused and placing himself across her path said, very quietly,

'You are quite right. Any light that we have upon these subjects can only come to us from above.' Such as I have been able to find out, I give to others; and what I have found amounts to this. Only one thing about us is eternal, that is character; and only the influences which mould that character are of great importance. All that develops kindness towards our fellow-creatures, pureness of

moral vision, straightforwardness of action, is to me an eternal reality, because it is helping to build up for me my character; and character is the house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens.'

Miss Pentwistle had always thought the house not made with hands was something quite different, composed chiefly of gold and precious stones, and having nothing at all about its structure connected with this present life. Indeed it was something to be looked forward to by way of contrast, when one gets chilled and depressed in consequence of other people not appreciating one's spiritual excellencies. And she had a vague notion that somebody ought to write to the bishop about Mr. Rock's way of thinking.

He went on as if he had almost forgotten that she was standing there, listening.

'There is no other way of pressing home

eternal realities, either upon ourselves or other people, than by living as purely and simply as we can in the life that now is, and which, after all, is the only life we know anything about. To see and touch and do, the duty close at hand, is all of religion that is required from any of us, whether we stand on the brink of another world, as the phrase is, or whether we are thickly closed round by the cares and wearinesses of this one.

Miss Pentwistle drew herself up. If these were the husks poor Margaret Dyson had been fed upon, well for her that some one else in the parish was able to supplement them with something more akin to the fatted calf of the elder brother.

'Mr. Rock,' she replied, 'I consider your doctrines very dangerous. There is nothing saving in them. You forget that we are poor, lost, corrupt creatures, incapable of a

good thought or a noble impulse; *utterly* incapable.

‘I have not forgotten it, Miss Pentwistle, for I never know it.’

This was really too dreadful. They would be having infidelity preached next broadly and openly from the Lowater pulpit, if Mr. Rock were allowed to stay in the parish much longer. But as long as Miss Pentwistle could lift up her voice against such teaching, she would. And she did it now.

‘Mr. Rock, I am very surprised to hear you give utterance to sentiments of this character. I consider them likely to disseminate mischief. There is no safety for us except as we entirely cast away all reliance upon our own merits. It is my comfort and privilege to believe that everything has been done for me; *everything*.’

And as Lady Lowater's companion stood

there, looking down upon the exceedingly unsatisfactory little man who had been appointed by the bishop of the diocese to provide food convenient for her, she certainly did feel satisfied with herself. She, at any rate, had been kept from falling into any such pitfalls of spiritual error. Mr. Rock, however, made matters still worse by his reply to her remarks as to the comfort which her faith produced.

'Miss Pentwistle, I believe nothing has been done for any of us that we can do for ourselves; and in the great matters of moving our own lives in the right direction, power, to its very last particle, is duty. That is my creed. What I could not do for myself has been done for me; no more.'

'I do not understand you,' said Miss Pentwistle, loftily. 'It seems to me that such a state of mind as you express to, implies

pride of the most dangerous description. And excuse me for reminding you that our safety lies in despising ourselves.'

'Does it? Then why are we told to honour all men, if we are to despise ourselves?'

'Mr. Rock, this is frivolous. This is wresting the Scriptures. I would rather we ended the discussion.'

Mr. Rock smiled.

'For the present, then, we will. Only remember, I shall be glad to have your views upon eternal realities at any time when you feel at liberty to give them to me.'

And, getting his hat off this time without any protest from the lady, Mr. Rock was soon going cheerily forward on his way to Lowater Court.

CHAPTER IV.

PASSING the woodman's cottage, he turned aside to speak a friendly word with Margaret Dyson.

Her little patch of garden, a shred cut out from the Lowater plantations, and guarded east and north by their serried ranks of young firs, was busy with the life which Nature stirs in early summer time. There was a ceaseless buzz of bees amongst the great clumps of honesty, one purple mass of bloom now, that stretched from Ben's home-made rustic bench by the limes, away to where the gorse, touched here and there with flecks

of gold, fringed the edges of the common. Sparrows were chaffering and bargaining in the ivy, as though any amount of marketing business must be got through before sundown. The swallows, more leisurely, having done their day's work of nest-building in the early morning, while yet the dew was moistening the clay for them in the lanes, sat preening their wings on the cottage roof, exchanging remarks with each other in the dainty *dilattante* way peculiar to their kind, not even troubling themselves, so well content were they with their position, to dart down upon the butterflies, yellow, brown, and red, which flapped their wings in luxurious idleness upon Margaret's sweet-williams. And now and again, where the beds of thyme and marjoram bloomed on the sunny side of the cottage, a great humble-bee would

come rolling, tumbling along, burying himself and flopping over and over with lazy delight amongst the honey-laden flowers; too full-fed either to taste or gather, caring only to enjoy, and boom out his satisfaction in canticles of melodious bass, whilst others did the work.

But, if bees and butterflies were lazy, another individual was wide awake enough, and this was Margaret's magpie, who hung in his wicker-cage just outside the cottage door, so near that when the door was open, as happened to be the case now, he could, by putting his head close to the bars, see all that was going on inside, or, if nothing wanted looking after there, he could command a full view of the front garden, from the white kitchen-grove under the lilac bushes, to the bonny beds and the gorse-champs and the ivied

chimneys where the sparrows were making such a commotion over their mercantile transactions.

Paddy, as the bird was called, watched everything with the air of a person whose responsibilities are numerous. Evidently he was set there to see that other people did their duty. It was amusing to note the glance of utter contempt which he cast out of the corner of his eye upon the lazy bee, humbling and bumbling amongst the thyme beds just under his cage. Was *that* all the creature had to do? Could he not leave his singing, and get on with a little useful occupation? carry home a basket of pollen, at least, for his wife and family, if he had them, instead of being only thankful for mercies which other people had to supply? The idle, lumpish fellow! And then that butterfly; and Paddy bustled to the other

corner of his cage, overlooking the sweet-williams. "Was ever anything more irritating than that fat, brown butterfly, lying asleep for this last hour and more upon the very biggest and rosiest boss of bloom that it could find? He had rated and scolded at it until he was hoarse; and there it lay yet, scarcely so much as flapping a wing in acknowledgment of all his trouble. If the swallows had been good for anything, they would have made an end of it long ago; but they, too, were just as idle and demoralized as the rest of the creatures. It seemed to rest upon himself, hard-worked biped that he was, to keep the whole of the out-door establishment in order. He would have the entire crew of them up before the master, yes, that he would."

And with a fling and a shriek, and a volley of abuse, Paddy tore up and down

his cage, and shook and rattled it so, that even the humble-bee looked up to see what was the matter, and then rolled slowly off to the other end of the marjoram bed. And the swallows tilted their pretty little heads, and peeped inquisitively over the eaves, but that was all they did. And the butterfly, with a leisurely flop, tumbled on to the next boss of sweet-william. The sparrows only chattered on as if nothing had been said to them. They were accustomed to the magpie's fussiness, and it did not make any difference.

Having succeeded in convincing the other creatures that he really was finding fault, Paddy thought he had done enough, so he went to that corner of his cage from which he could command a prospect of the interior of the cottage, and thence, with a finely critical expression, first in

one round, black eye, and then in the other, took note of how the afternoon tidying was going on.

Stephen Rock, coming quietly up the overgrown path which led from the back lane, and seeing the fun of the whole thing, could not help laughing to himself. It was so like Miss Pentwistle. And with much the same result too, after all the talking and fidgeting and meddling; namely, that things went on just as they had gone on before either lady or magpie came upon the scene. There was a bustle and a flutter of ill-feeling, more on the part of the scolder than the scolded, and a shaking up of temper, and a shaking down of ineffectual dust, and a few vehement threats and protests, and nobody was any worse. Neither was anybody any better.

But Stephen Rock himself, when he

found who was doing that afternoon tidying, was tempted to stand in the shadow of the ivy, and watch, unseen.

It was Valence Dormer who had come, as she came now every afternoon, to put all neat and straight, and to prepare old Ben Dyson's tea before he returned from his work in the plantations. She was moving about swiftly, noiselessly, at every step making something pleasanter, carrying a sort of sunshine with her, brightening, as a picture might do, each bit of the quaint old kitchen at which she happened to linger. Now she was standing in front of the black oak delf case, reaching up to dust its high shelves, her straw hat pushed from her forehead, the sleeves falling back from her round, strong arms. Now she was busy at the corner cupboard getting out the cups and saucers for tea, busy, but so quiet still, not a rattle

nor a jar, nor a jolt to vex the weary invalid there, as one by one the things were spread in order, and the little table, with its bit of red cloth, made to look so bright. If Mrs. Horrocks could but have done things half as quietly, thought Stephen to himself. And still he stayed there in the shadow.

‘And now,’ Valence said, when all was done, ‘I shall see if that cake is ready, and you must have your tea. It won’t do for you to wait for your father. He is late always on a Friday night, because of the paying of the wages; and, if you don’t have tea at the proper time, you cannot get up an appetite for your bread and milk at supper-time.’

With that Valence, who seemed to be as much at home in the cottage as if she had lived there all her life, stooped to the oven door—an attitude which Mr. Rock

thought made her look prettier than ever—and drew out a tin of tempting little cakes, which sent their fragrance to where he stood in the porch, and made him think he should have no objection to stay tea, especially if Miss Dormer poured it out for him. But it was all for Margaret, this afternoon.

‘Those two are done to a turn,’ Valence said, slipping them off on a little napkin which she had prepared, and covering them up while she put the others back in the oven. ‘You must have them now, whilst they are quite hot; not that they are at all good for you so, but you are to look upon it as a treat, you understand.’

‘It’s treat enough for me, miss, to see you going about like that,’ said Margaret, a world of love and devotion in her faded eyes as she watched the young girl moving to and fro. ‘I wouldn’t mind how long I

was fast here, if only I had you near-hand to look at. The days haven't been half so long since you came to the place. You do me as much good as the medicine the doctor gives me.'

Valence laughed, such a bright, cheery laugh, as she laid a stem or two of wild hyacinth on the napkin which covered the cakes, and then poured some milk into a glass.

'I ought to do you a great deal more good than the medicine, Margaret, if I am worth anything at all. At least, what I do for you ought to do you the good. It is just food and nursing that you want now, and somebody to be kind to you. And I like to come just as much as you like to have me, so it is all right.

There was such a frank honesty about the girl, Stephen Rock could not help smiling to himself as he watched her. She

knew what she was worth, and yet she knew it with utter simplicity. It did not make her in the least stuck-up, or conceited, or pious. And, better still, there was no air of the professional nurse about her, only the home-like, loving manner of a sister, ministering from her own store of health and knowledge and cheerfulness because it was a joy to her to do it.

She was not didactic, she did not preach nor draw attention to the skilfulness with which she was doing her work, nor mingle that work with detracting observations on the manner in which it had been done before she took it in hand. She just moved about, a presence of usefulness in the room, and, wherever she had passed, there was sunshine.

And she looked so pretty in her pink gingham dress and holland apron, and the straw hat tilted off from her forehead.

Stephen Rock could have stood amongst the ivy watching her all the afternoon.

For except at church, where she sat with her back to him, that being the most convenient place from which to see and pick up the things which Mrs. Antony was always dropping, he had only had an opportunity of observing her closely at Lady Lowater's little dinner-party. And then she was in the splendours of semi-evening toilette, splendours which, though of the very mildest description, looked at from a fashionable point of view, were yet sufficient to remove her beyond the pale of his ambition, he being a man who rarely saw the female sex except cloaked and bonnetted, at any rate, that portion of the sex who could excite in his breast emotions other than of the strictly professional sort. Miss Dormer at Lowater Court, in her black gauze and scarlet

geraniums, a certain air of quietness and thoughtfulness, almost pride, about her, had made him feel painfully at a distance, especially enveloped as she was by the scented atmosphere and vapoury puffings and frillings and elegances of Mrs. Antony. But Miss Dormer in her holland apron, dusting Margaret Dyson's plates and dishes, and arranging Margaret Dyson's tea-table, and ministering with such gentle womanliness to Margaret Dyson's needs, was a creature not at all

... .. too good
For human nature's daily food.'

Hitherto the curate's observation of young ladies had made him thankful that he could do his life-work without their help. Now, for the first time, he felt how much one of the right sort, could cheer and lighten that work.

But it would not do to stand there

amongst the ivy, making his own observations. Such conduct placed him too much on a level with Paddy the magpie, who, with head cunningly turned on one side, had been watching the tidying of the woodman's kitchen, giving a little flutter of approbation now and then with such intelligence as was in him. Mr. Rock had just made up his mind to go boldly in, when Valence, having placed Margaret's meal conveniently for her, took the big Bible from the table in the window, and began to read aloud.

He bared his head and listened. There was no harm in that. And it gave him the chance of looking longer at the bright, earnest face. Her voice as she read was cheery, full of hope and purpose. The sunshine and the freshness and the beauty of all around seemed to have entered into it.

'It is better comfort than I could give to her,' he said to himself, when the chapter was ended. And, putting on his hat, he would have turned quietly away. But Valence, rising, saw him. She thought he had but just come.

'I don't think I would have let you in,' she said, 'if you had been a quarter of an hour earlier. Margaret was just having tea.'

'And that was more important than my ministrations.'

Valence looked at him, not quite certain whether he was taking her words in joke or earnest, and quite as uncertain, too, how she was to take his.

For, with all her goodness and clear-headedness, Valence Dorrner felt what very energetic people are liable to feel, a touch of impatience with those whose work appears to lie in the direction of theory,

rather than practice. To that class she relegated clergymen. They were very good in their way, and there were no doubt occasions when one could not do without them, at least not without inconvenience to the existing order of social arrangements. But then, as she argued to herself, those social arrangements were to a great degree conventional. Suppose that some exclusively ecclesiastical millennium could withdraw every clergyman in the British dominions to a superior state of existence, what difference would that wholesale translation make to the regular business of life? That life would go on much as before, as regards the useful, practical part of it. Men would buy and sell, build, plant, manufacture, marry—at the registrar's office of course—and be given in marriage, just as usual. In fact, society would find itself very much in the

same condition that the Venetians did when Paul the pope placed them under that famous interdict—as comfortable as ever.

And Mr. Rock, so Valencee had said to herself, sitting in church where she could not see his face, Mr. Rock was very much like other clergymen, a little shorter perhaps in his sermons, as he was in person, and more to the point than some pulpit essayists, but in other ways what difference was there? He was like the rest of his class, a convenient adjunct to society in town or country, something one was almost obliged to have, like a bit of trimming on the edge of a garment, to give a finish. But all the same the garment would have been just as useful, and its wearer just as comfortable, if prejudice and the bit of trimming could have been alike cast aside.

All this was in Valence Dormer's thoughts as she turned and looked at Mr. Rock, there in the porch of the woodman's cottage. And did he mean to imply reproach, or was it only playfulness, or what was it, when he made that observation about Margaret's tea being of more importance than his own ministrations?

Valence thought she had better take it seriously. Her experience had led her to doubt the ability of the average cleric to take a joke, or to make one. And so she replied, with a formality quite unnatural to her,

'Well, I always think that food is one of the first things to be attended to when you have the care of an invalid. You see, if the meals are not given regularly, or if even religious instruction is allowed to interfere with them——'

But here Mr. Rock burst into such a

heartly laugh that Valence felt she had been going on the wrong tack altogether.

‘Do you think I don’t know that? Ask Margaret if I haven’t got tea ready for her myself, and made her take it, too, before I offered her anything in the way of more spiritual refreshment. Everything has its place. Don’t think I want to turn you out of yours.’

Valence gave him a keen look from under her dark eyebrows.

‘You are a very sensible clergyman.’

The way she said it amused Mr. Rock even more than her previous misunderstanding of his intentions. It told of such entire self-unconsciousness, such forgetfulness of everything but the work she had to do, and the best way of doing it. And though she was evidently measuring him, and pretty severely too, she was in

no wise troubling herself about the impression which she might produce upon him. Apparently, she did not intend to say anything more; for taking off her holland apron, and folding it up, she at once began to make preparations for going away.

'I don't want to interrupt you,' said Stephen, rather stammeringly. 'I thought I might perhaps stay and read a chapter to Margaret, but you have done that already. I waited until you had finished before I came in.'

'What a pity! Yes, I generally read to Margaret as she takes her tea. It tires her now to read for herself, so I do it for her.'

'You do a deal more than that, Miss,' said the poor invalid. 'She talks to me sir, while the meaning comes out as plain

I tell her it's every bit as good as a sermon.'

A rosy flush came into Valence's face now, but it was of amusement, not of embarrassment. To be praised in presence of the clergyman himself, as a good preacher of sermons, was certainly rather too much.

'That is telling tales out of school, Margaret,' she said, turning her face rapidly away from Mr. Rock, who seemed to have taken on a fit of shyness, and she wanted to put him at his ease by letting him see that, if he did not care about them, Margaret's confidences did not make her uncomfortable. 'Now, you know I always read the chapter to you under protest, because, when you are tired, it hurts you to read for yourself. And as for the talking, well, if you say any more about it, I shall be obliged to give over.'

Mr. Rock, will be reminding me that I haven't a license, or, worse still, he may be afraid that I am introducing dissent into the parish. But I must go now. Good-bye.'

And she held out her hand to Mr. Rock.

'I am going to see Lady Lowater. She has asked me to stay there for awhile, and I thought I would answer the invitation in person.'

'I am on my way there, too,' said the curate. •

But somehow he could not propose that they should walk together. And Miss Dormer, gathering up her little properties, did not seem to expect it. With a bright smile, half for him and half for Margaret, she left them both, and was soon out of sight, climbing the little bit of steep path which led out of the cottage garden to the plantations.

Stephen Rock, watching her, felt a curious discomfort when he remembered that Sir Merrion was coming home.

CHAPTER V.

THE following Monday Lady Lowater's big carriage, with the pair of horses and the coachman and the footman, and all the rest of the accessories, was sent to the Elms to fetch Miss Dormer. My lady had ordered as much ceremony and circumstance as possible, partly to please Mr. and Mrs. Antony, who were very much open to such things, and partly to let the servants at the Court see that the coming guest was one whom she delighted to honour. Lady Lowater knew well enough that, if only the basket had been sent, Miss Dormer would have received but

scant attention during her visit from the outdoor flunkeys of the Court ; but having her brought with the rarely used solemnities of heraldic panels and velvet cushions, a salutary effect would be produced upon the manners, not only of the liveried people, but of Miss Pentwistle herself, who was slightly disposed to rebel against the new visitor.

Mrs. Antony was charmed, and took care that the horses should stand champing their bits for a good quarter of an hour at the gate of the Elms.

'Now, Valence,' she said, when everything was ready, 'I hope you will have a very pleasant visit. It is so excessively kind of dear Lady Lowater. I feel as if we could never be grateful enough to her. Such an introduction for you.'

'Mamma, I don't suppose I am going to be introduced to anything but a more con-

venient starting-point for my work at Ben Dyson's cottage. That is why Lady Lowater is asking me, and I am obliged to her accordingly. I shall take nothing else for granted.'

'Very well. But, as you say, that is quite enough to be thankful for. And there is no necessity for you to hurry away. I have written to Miss Warrington to ask her to explain to the hospital committee.'

Which was a fib, pure and simple, Mrs. Antony only having made up her mind that she would write as soon as Valence was settled at the Court. But that was of no consequence.

'And Miss Warrington will leave the matter quite at your own disposal. She sees, as I do, the great importance of carrying on your work here. And as for myself, Valence dear, do not let me stand in the way for a moment. I shall very

cheerfully take any little extra trouble in the house, so long as I know that you are happy.'

'Oh! but you know, mamma,' said Valence, with unnecessary frankness, 'I should have gone away, anyhow; for you told me, only the day Lady Lowater's invitation came, that you thought I had better return to Hurchester this week.'

Mrs. Antony felt annoyed, but this was no time to show it.

'Did I, my dear! Very probably you misunderstood me. You often do. For, now that we must begin to have a few little afternoon parties, I should find you a convenience in helping me with the arrangements. But that must not for a moment stand in the way of your real usefulness. It will be such a pleasure to me to feel that you are carrying out Lady Lowater's wishes about poor Margaret Dyson.

'I will come home every afternoon if you like, mamma.'

'Not on any account, Valence, not on any account. Devote yourself entirely to your work. I feel that I am giving you up to what is a most sacred duty. You will do it more efficiently if you feel that you have no other demands upon you.'

For Mrs. Antony could rise to a lofty moral elevation sometimes—in words. And, besides, there was a meaning even in her words this time, deeper than Valence knew. For who should attend Margaret Dyson to her death, there in the labourer's cottage, amidst the low, dull surroundings of poverty, but herself, the fashionable pet of society? And to be able to send Valence was a sort of sop to her own heartlessness. She was doing her duty, after all, and doing it by proxy better than she could have done it in her own person. Mrs.

Antony thought, on the whole, everything was working very favourably.

'And there is just one other thing,' she continued, 'which I should like to say, Valence dear, before you go. Do not be at all surprised if Miss Pentwistle should show herself slightly disagreeable.'

'Miss Pentwistle, mamma! why should she be disagreeable to me?'

'Well, my dear, I have been more in the world than you have, and I know better what people have to contend with, and I think it quite possible that Miss Pentwistle may have a little feeling of jealousy at your being taken notice of by Lady Lowater. Of course Miss Pentwistle has her good qualities, but yours are of a higher type, and she must be able to see that, and it may affect her manner towards you. I cannot say that it will. I only suggest that it may.'

'Well, mamma, said Valence, buttoning her gloves with perfect unconcern, 'if Miss Pentwistle makes me uncomfortable, or I find that I am making her so, I will just go off to Hurchester. I don't see why we should interfere with each other.'

But that was the very last thing which a sensible young lady ought to do, under the circumstances, and Mrs. Antony hastened to put matters in the right light.

'That is exactly what I expected you to say, Valence, and you would do it, I know, if you acted upon your own impulses. And that is why I mentioned it, in order to put you on your guard. Do not let Lady Lowater's wishes and Margaret Dyson's comfort be interfered with by any little coldness on the part of Miss Pentwistle. If you fancy you detect any, take no notice. Pass it over in silence.'

That is just what I should do, mamma, and come away.'

'No, Valence, not come away. That would be very foolish. Indeed, more than foolish, it would be a shrinking from your duty. And I am sure you would never do that.'

'Then, suppose I put Miss Pentwistle down, mamma,' said Valence, with a little touch of amusement in her voice. 'You told me once you should like to do it yourself after that bit of impertinence about the inkstand. Suppose I act as your champion and do battle for us both. I think I could joust with Miss Pentwistle without being unhorsed.'

'I don't quite understand what you mean, Valence, about being unhorsed. I have never seen Miss Pentwistle riding. As for punishing her for her impertinence, I shall find some way of doing that myself,

but it is my very strong desire that you should not come into collision with her. And, above all things, that you should not let any ill-natured remarks or behaviour of hers influence you to shorten your visit by a single hour. Now, do be advised by me in this matter.'

'All right, mamma. But as she has her work and I have mine, and they lie in quite separate directions, I think we ought to be able to keep the peace. Now, I am sure those horses have been waiting long enough. Good-bye.'

So Valence departed, Mrs. Antony with a feeling of triumph watching the carriage, and the champing steeds, and the coachman, and the footman, and all the rest of the things as they rolled away down the broad high-road. And she watched them with more triumph because, just as the footman was holding open the door for

Valence to enter, the Bellerays were walking past, and would, of course, see that Miss Dormer was going on a visit to the Court. It was most fortunate. In all probability it would settle the question, at present hanging in the balance, whether the Belleray acquaintance should be confined to calls of ceremony twice a year, or expand into the full-blown gorgeousness of dinner invitations, and consequent reception into the county circle.

Who could have thought it? And Mrs. Antony, smiling to herself, went back to her elegant blue satin drawing-room, in one of whose recesses there hung a photograph of Lowater Court, showing the mossy gateway at the back, a great point of interest to antiquarians, because it was a genuine bit of fifteenth-century domestic architecture. A point of interest to herself also, because it opened into the

courtyard of the kitchens, and in one of those kitchens was a curious old stone panel with a bear and ragged staff rudely carved upon it, and under that panel was the sink, with due modern convenience of zinc lining and hot and cold water taps, at which Libbie had stood many and many an hour, five-and-twenty years before, washing that fine dinner-service of blue and gold, whose pieces, always carefully kept in the butler's pantry, were perhaps even now being laid forth for Sir Merrion's first meal on this the day of his probable arrival at home.

CHAPTER VI

BUT Miss Pentwistle was a sensible woman, too sensible to let her vexation proclaim itself openly. She knew as well as possible that she was checkmated, and that Mrs. Antony was triumphant, so far as Miss Dormer's visit was concerned, and the two ladies hated each other accordingly. But at the same time a fresh game could be entered upon.

If management of Miss Pentwistle's could prevent it, the present mistress of the Court should certainly not become the Dowager Lady Lowater. But at present things were not propitious. Here was

Miss Dormer established for a visit of indefinite length. And, as ill-luck would have it, on the very evening of the day she arrived, Sir Merrion made his appearance. Nothing could have fallen out more unfortunately for her plans.

Sir Merrion Lowater was a fine, well-favoured young man, conveniently like what his mother had been in the bloom of her youth, just as Valence Dormer was conveniently unlike what Mrs. Antony had been at the same period. He was tall, open-browed, of Saxon build and complexion, entirely unlike any of the Lowater people who hung in the corridors and galleries of the Court; a Merrion, quite a Merrion, as people said who knew both sides of the family. His face gave no indication of intellectual power, but then his pleasant soldierly ways and those broad acres on which he trod with the fine lady

pendent bearing of a man born to possess, more than made up for the lack of mental gifts. And he was amiable and kind-hearted, full of health and spirits, fond of country sports, genial with the village folk, the very man to be popular and beloved, both by high and low, whenever it should please him to come home and live upon his estate.

Also, as Miss Pentwistle soon convinced herself, the very man to fall in love with the first pleasant-looking girl who happened to come across his path.

Others saw that, too.

'You are doing it with your eyes open, I suppose, Lady Lowater?'

It was Mr. Antony who said this. He and Mrs. Antony had been taking luncheon at the Court, some little attention of that kind being the least her ladyship could offer during Valence Dormer's visit. And

after luncheon, certainly not by her own arrangement, she and the family solicitor found themselves strolling up and down the lawn in front of the house, the rest of the party having disappeared.

'You are doing it with your eyes open, I suppose.'

And, as he said it, he glanced towards the nearest plantation, the one through which the path lay to the rock-seat. Valence Dormer and Sir Merriion were coming down that path now, she stopping from time to time to gather wild hyacinths, he stopping also, not to gather them, but to fasten them in her hat or amongst her hair. A pretty picture they made, Sir Merriion gallant and handsome, with just that air of easy self-possession about him which a man may feel who has no doubt of the ground he is treading upon. And Valence pliant, independent, and agreeable.

barrassed by his little attentions, nor on the other hand painfully anxious for their continuance. Indeed, perhaps that was the very reason why he found it pleasant to offer them. There was a certain fine princess-like independence about Valence Dormer, the outcome of her own power to do some worthy work in the world. A girl who has that power, and who has found for herself some way to use it, carries within her a sunny brightness, a power to command and control circumstances, which is worth more to her than either wealth or rank.

Lady Lowater followed the direction of Mr. Antony's eye. She understood his meaning, and she said,

'If it were so, Mr. Antony, I do not think they need either of them find fault.'

He looked at her closely. Could she really mean it? He and his wife had

talked it over between themselves, but only as a contingency which might provoke Lady Lowater's severest opposition. Now he began to think she had probably foreseen it. Was she in this way thinking to bind him over more strongly than before to keep silent about the past? If so, all well. He could afford to agree to that arrangement.* His step-daughter the mistress of Lowater Court, there would no longer be any question about his own position and that of his wife in the neighbourhood.

'Find fault,' he replied, with a touch of complacency, 'oh, dear no. Perhaps, things being as they are——'

And he glanced quickly at her as he spoke.

'Perhaps, things being as they are, there could not be a more suitable match than my wife's daughter for Sir Gordon. The question is, should we and mine? I have

the circumstances, I think you had better not.'

Lady Lowater drew herself up. She had purposely avoided noticing the quick look which he cast upon her.

'You need not be afraid, Mr. Antony. My son is all I have to love. If he marries a lady, I shall ask for nothing else. I understand Valence Dormer's father was a soldier and a gentleman. As for Mrs. Antony, I presume you have satisfied yourself as to her antecedents.'

'Of course I have. Indeed, as I intimated to you once before, my chief reason for marrying at all was that I might obtain the position which can only come to a man when he has a lady at the head of his establishment. Money I can make for myself, but a position in society I look to my wife to make for me. And I am bound to say that I think Mrs. Antony has suc-

ceeded wonderfully. You see she is already received amongst quite the upper class people of the place. We were lunching the other day at the Dollingbros, people who would not have looked at me six months ago.'

'It certainly was a triumph,' said my lady, scornfully. 'We shall have the countess calling upon you next.'

'There is no telling. My wife is a clever woman, Lady Lowater, a very clever woman. I daresay some people, yourself among them, wonder how she condescended to marry me; but then, as I say, I always was somewhat of a favourite with the ladies. I take after Theodore in that respect.'

And again there was that not quite business-like, half-sarcastic, wholly vulgar. Lady Lowater's face fell as a stone, not daring to show any more of her

press her loathing of the man.' She was in his power. He knew her bitter past. Having once in the madness of her misery given the lower nature dominion over the higher, this was her punishment, that all through life she must drag the chains of her servitude to the man who could, if she defied him, make known her degradation to the world.

No more freedom for her, no power to look outward to the light. Neither was there any forgiveness, for she had made no restitution. The people who should have been lords of the soil where she dwelt now, were kept from it, by falsehood of hers, falsehood which, for her boy's sake more than her own, she had no courage to confess. Having sinned, she herself could die, that would be easy; but she could not sweep away all the brightness from his life, could not send him

forth a beggar, both of lands and of name, where once he had borne himself so proudly. Not that, anything but that for her brave handsome Merriem, who trusted her so entirely, who surrounded her with all she knew of love, who was to her the one light shining in a dark place, oh, how dark!

But she could say no word of this. She must hide her bitterness and cover up her chains. She must be calm and dignified, as became the bearer of one of the best names in the county. Oh, heavens, the pity of it all!

'Shall we go back to the house?' she said, in a quiet voice. Mrs. Antony may think I am not sufficiently attentive.

That was an argument which made the lawyer willing to postpone the satisfaction which he always felt in showing Lady Lowater his power over her.

claims were a touchy point. Her elevated position in the neighbourhood was all he had to comfort himself with, for he was beginning to find out that a pretty woman and a petted one, when she has a temper of her own, can make home anything but a pleasant place. To put the case plainly, he was no longer master in his own house. And perhaps the fact of the submission which he had to manifest there, gave him an additional sense of pleasure in exercising what authority was still left him over other people. A frightened man, on his own ground, there was the more need for him to be a fearless one on the ground of other people.

But, whatever had to be foregone, Mrs. Anthony must be kept in good humour, so the conversation was dropped, and he returned to the house with my lady.

CHAPTER VII

Miss PENTWISTLE also had seen those two young people coming out of the plantation: Sir Merriam amusing himself by sticking wild hyacinths in Miss Dormer's hat and hair, Miss Dormer herself not checking him in the least, any more than if he had been the curate at ninety-seven pounds ten a year, if one could have imagined Mr. Rock paying that sort of attention to a lady.

Indeed, the easy, unconscious air with which Lady Lowland's new favourite accepted her position was just a little bit provoking. Miss Pentwistle felt that some

thing must be done, and that she was the person to do it.

But first of all she must convince herself that her course of action was a righteous one. She was far too excellent a woman to do anything whose justice had not entirely manifested itself to her. Let other people enter upon a course of action, and afterwards search out their reasons for doing so. She began by searching out her reasons, and then she shaped her course accordingly, so that she never felt any hesitation, any qualms of conscience about what she had set her mind upon. She was accustomed every night to go through the events of the day, in so far as they had influenced her own conduct, and ask herself whether her motives would bear inspection. She was generally able to answer in the affirmative. She forgot that, as there was no counsel on the opposing

side, such answer was not a difficult one to obtain. However, it had satisfied her so far.

Then to convince herself of the rightness of a thing that was going to be done, was more easy because in this case any arguments which conscience might, after a feeble fashion, bring forward, could be silenced by a determination on her own part that she would so direct her line of action as to meet them. Miss Pentwistle undermine people's reputation? Nothing of the sort. Miss Pentwistle keep her neighbours from good fortune which they deserved, and which they would use well? Nothing could be farther from her intention. Miss Pentwistle repine at the Providence which filled another woman's lap and emptied her own? She should hate herself if she could for a moment entertain such a thought. Miss Pentwistle

do her duty to the lady who had for so many years afforded her a comfortable home? Yes, that she would. Nothing on earth should tempt her to swerve from it, even by the picking up of a pin which did not belong to her. If there ever was a woman who, no matter what she was expected to say in the General Confession, could, at least in the face of society, affirm that she did the things which she ought to do, Miss Pentwistle felt herself to be that person.

Now, this matter had to be looked at in three lights: the light of Lady Lowater, the light of young Sir Merriop, and the light of Valence Dormer.

Only those three. Miss Pentwistle would have been very much hurt if her conscience had so much as hinted that she was, in addition, looking at it from her own. Even conscience must mind its manners when it

was accusing such an excellent person as Lady Lowater's companion.

To begin then with the baronet's widow.

Of course, so long as Sir Merrión remained unmarried, she was the undisputed mistress of Lowater Court. Everything there was carried on according to her desires. She wanted quietness, and the place was so quiet that the rabbits nibbled the very flowers on the terrace beds, and the wood pigeons cooed in the yew-trees close by the windows of the long drawing-room. She wanted solitude. Nobody ever came to the house except two or three times a year when dinner-parties had to be given. She wanted liberty to do as she liked. She had it to such an extent that, saving the one item of the game and the traps, she had not known for many a year what contradiction meant. A woman could not have her

own way more entirely in everything.

Now, if Merriem married, all that would be changed. If Lady Lowater remained at the Court at all, she would remain as its guest, not its mistress. If she removed to the little fancy villa which had been built on a bit of rising ground outside the park, as her dower house, she would soon find herself a mere nonentity. Her position, her influence, her independence would all be gone. With her love of authority, there would be no one to command. With her love for homage, there would be no one to bow down to her. She would be straitened on all sides. Her life would be a mere shell emptied of everything that had made it worth living. Had she thought of that? If not, ought not some one else to think of it for her?

Miss Pentwistle decided in her own mind that somebody ought.

Next, the matter had to be looked at from the point of view of the young man himself.

It was manifestly unjust to him to allow him to throw himself away upon the first girl whom he happened to meet. She might be suitable or unsuitable, that was not the point. The point was that he ought to have time to choose, and a number to choose from. Everyone knew how readily, under the circumstances, a young man would lose his heart, make a fool of himself in fact. Coming from a station where he had not seen an English girl for two years, making the home voyage in a small steamer, where probably there were a couple or so of officers' wives, just enough to put him into the way of flirting, get his hand in, as one might say, thrown at once into the close companionship of a bright, pleasant, intelligent girl, why, the

poor fellow had no chance. It was a foregone conclusion. Everyone might tell how it would end. He would make her an offer before the week was out.

And then what? Everyone might tell how that would end, too. Six months after they were married, he would find out that he had made a mistake. He would see some lady that he really 'could love, some lady whose relatives and connections he could be proud of. He would begin to be careless of his middle-class wife, then negligent, then perhaps unfaithful to her, for one heard of such things often enough; and the end would be wretchedness for them both. Sir Merrion then, had better remain as he was for the present.

There was only Valence Dormer left to be considered. Of course she would be glad enough to marry a baronet and become my Lady Lowater. That was only

natural, unless she, like those who were reasoning for her, happened to be wise enough to look to the conclusion of the matter. But, even if she did not look to its conclusion, there were other considerations which a girl who had any proper sense of duty would not be justified in overlooking.


She had spent much time in acquainting herself with the details of her very useful profession. She was now in a position to bring her experience to bear upon actual life. There was suffering she could alleviate, there was knowledge she could impart, there was influence she could exert in the homes of the poor. No one could measure the good which might be accomplished by a judicious, intelligent, devoted nurse. Miss Warrington was reckoning upon her services at Hurchester, work was waiting for her there, work which perhaps

no other of the staff could do so efficiently. A career of unlimited usefulness was opened before her. Was she justified in abandoning it for a marriage which, however splendid in appearance, would probably only terminate in misery?

Clearly no. Common-sense and right feeling alike protested against it. It was a distinct waste of time, talent, and opportunity, and, if no one else prevented it, Miss Pentwistle felt she must. Lady Lowater, dear creature! was blind to everything just at present. She was so delighted at having her son home again, being watched over, waited upon, and deferred to by him, that she had no thought for the prudent management of her own affairs. Sir Merrion himself was equally reckless. A bright face, a pleasing manner, a dash of independence, and he was completely enslaved; at least he would be in

a few more days. Mrs. Antony, all eyes, ears, and cleverness, would be only too glad to bring about anything advantageous to her daughter. The daughter herself could not be expected to be anything but awake to the desirableness of the immediate prospect. And therefore she, Miss Pentwistle, was the only one with whom the responsibility rested of placing things upon a safe footing. She must in fact be a providence to those who seemed deprived by force of circumstances of the capability of taking care of themselves.

And, rising from the comfortable easy-chair in which she had been following out this train of thought, Miss Pentwistle resolved that she would do her duty like a woman. Having made this resolve, she said her prayers, and went to bed.



CHAPTER VIII.

SHE was not long in finding or making the opportunity.

Lady Lowater generally spent the mornings with her son now, rambling about the estate and talking over possible improvements upon it. Miss Pentwistle therefore, not needing to be on duty as companion, could, under pretext of devoting herself to Miss Dorner, easily secure a quiet hour in which to say all that was upon her mind.

So far as Sir Merrion's mother was concerned, Miss Pentwistle must confess that the young lady's way was made very open

if she did happen to be cherishing any ambitious designs in a matrimonial direction. It appeared to be quite Lady Lowater's purpose to throw the young people together. Miss Pentwistle had done what she could, in an indirect manner, but of what use was that when some one else was frustrating every effort? Her ladyship showed a lamentable want of even common observation. Having lived so long out of the world, she seemed quite to have forgotten what might be expected to go on in it. And therefore she could easily be made the dupe of a designing person.

Not that Valence Dormer was designing. Miss Pentwistle could not and would not have said such a thing on any account. She had watched the girl closely, and, if she did encourage the attentions of Sir Merriem, it was more from a natural gaiety and brightness of disposition, than from any desire to

secure a good settlement for herself. Miss Pentwistle would give her credit for proper feeling in that respect. But Mrs. Antony *was* designing, and more than that she was clever, and more than that she was unscrupulous, as her behaviour in the matter of the inkstand had abundantly proved. Where the daughter failed, the mother would supplement her deficiencies. Still it would be advisable, perhaps, to begin with the daughter.

Accordingly Miss Pentwistle began one morning as she and Valence—Valence having been at the Court about a week—sat together in the library, the window open towards the rock-path, the scent of lilies-of-the-valley stealing in upon them as the June breeze blew down from the plantations. And one could just see a faint blue tinge of wild hyacinths where that path widened out into the sunshine.

It is such a charming arrangement, Miss Dormer, for you to be here. Really, nothing could have fallen out more fortunately. And so kind of dear Lady Lowater, is it not?

'Ever so kind,' said Valence, frankly. 'I have not had such a pleasant time in my life before. Indeed, I have scarcely ever been to any other place on a real visit. I know very little about society.'

A new idea came into Miss Pentwistle's mind. Perhaps, before entering upon the central subject, this conversation might so be turned as to throw a little light upon Mrs. Antony's antecedents. One naturally liked to know who people were, especially when they came to live in one's immediate neighbourhood; and as yet a wonderfully small amount of information had been obtained as to the previous career of the solicitor's wife.

'You surprise me,' she replied. 'I should have thought you had gone about a great deal. Your mother must always have been such a favourite in company. She is so very charming, and then she has such agreeable manners.'

'Yes. But then, you see, I am not my mother. I don't think I have ever been in danger of being told that my manners were charming.'

'Ah, well!' and Miss Pentwistle assumed the sententious tone which became her so well. 'You are perhaps all the better for not having been told it. Flattery is very dangerous. But still, putting that aside, you must have visited amongst your own dear papa's relations.'

'I don't much think he had any,' said Valence, simply. 'At any rate, we never used to see anything of them.'

'Perhaps he was an only child then.'

One does feel the want of relations in that case. It is a very pretty name. I don't think your mamma improved upon it when she married a second time. Or no, let me see, it was a third, was it not? I think some one told me it was a third time.'

'Yes,' and Valence said this with just a tone of unrest. 'Mamma had been married twice before.'

'I thought so. And I hope the first name was as distinguished as the second.'

I don't know. It was Southwell.'

Southwell. Oh! that is very pretty, too. I think it is quite as pretty as Dormer. Your mamma has been exceedingly fortunate in her choice of names. I often wish Providence had bestowed a more interesting one upon myself. Now nobody could get up any enthusiasm for a Pentwistle. But it is the one with which I was

born, and so I must be content with it.

Now Miss Pentwistle would willingly have pushed matters a step further, and found out the name with which Mrs. Antony was born, and which she dropped to enter upon such an interesting series. But that would have been inquisitive, and Miss Dormer was not a girl whom one could approach with anything like impertinence. She had learned something, however, the name of Mrs. Antony's first husband, and the fact that her second one's relatives had not taken much notice of her. Probably they, too, had discovered for themselves that she was a somewhat selfish, designing woman, chiefly fascinating to the male sex.

Therefore the more important topic might now be entered upon.

• Dear Lady Lowater seems so much

brighter since her son came home. She is so proud of him.'

'I should think so,' said Valence, without any hesitation. 'He is almost as handsome as Balder the sun-god, and so devoted to his mother, too.'

Miss Pentwistle did not know who Balder the sun-god might be, but she could ask Mr. Rock.

'You have seen a good deal of him, I mean of Sir Merrion, I daresay,' she continued. 'He must have impressed you as a most agreeable young man. I have often noticed you walking together in the grounds.'

And Miss Pentwistle looked keenly at Valence, but to no purpose.

'Oh! yes,' the girl replied, simply enough. 'You know this is not our first meeting. I saw a great deal of Sir Merrion

two or three years ago, when we were living at Hurchester. He had an accident, got run down by a cab or something, and was brought into the ward where I was on duty, so I had to attend to him. I suppose they brought him in because it was the nearest place, and then he could not be removed.

‘Ah, yes, I do remember hearing something about it. Very interesting. Quite the sort of thing one hears about in novels, ending sometimes in a wedding, if the rank of the parties is suitable.’

Here Miss Pentwistle made a little pause in order that Valence might say something. But Valence did not say anything, so she went on.

‘It really was very romantic. Lady Lowater mentioned it to me. I suppose Sir Merriem would write and tell her all about it. He must have felt very grateful

to you, for he is just the young man to be impressed by kindness. Indeed one might almost do anything with him in that way. I daresay you noticed it.'

'Well, it never entered into my mind to think how he could be impressed, because you see there was nothing for me to need to impress him about. I just had to do my duty and get him well as soon as I could. That was all.'

Miss Pentwistle looked up from her work. Was it effrontery, or what was it? To nurse a young baronet through a serious accident and never think of anything else but getting him well again as soon as possible! In fact, clearing his name off the books to make room for fresh patients, just as if he had been an ordinary day labourer who had fallen down from a ladder, or something of that sort. Miss Dorner was a curious young person. Or

else she was pretending very much. Miss Pentwistle proceeded on the supposition that she was pretending.

I am sure you would do everything that was possible for him. I believe Lady Lowater deeply feels her indebtedness to you.

Then a pause, during which Valence, busily engaged upon a red curtain which she was making to put up in Margaret Dyson's room, did not volunteer any remark. Then Miss Pentwistle began again.

'I hope Lady Lowater will not be disappointed in the hopes she is cherishing for her son.'

This time Valence did look up.

'What hopes?'

'Oh, I mean about making a suitable marriage.'

'That is what every mother wishes for

her son,' Valence replied, in a most matter-of-fact way, measuring off as she spoke a piece of tape for the curtain to be gathered upon. And judging from the amount of attention she gave to the halving and quartering of it, so that the fulness might come regularly, Margaret Dyson's affairs were much more important to her than those of Sir Merrion Lowater. But that again might be only pretending.

'Well, yes,' Miss Pentwistle said, meditatively, 'I suppose every mother *does* wish it. But when it is a case of her only child and large estates, and an old family name, of course a suitable marriage is of much more importance.'

Again Miss Dormer's silence intimated that she had nothing to urge to the contrary.

'Very much more importance. I do hope he will not let himself be drawn in

by anyone. I believe Lady Lowater quite understands that the object of his coming home is to meet with a wife, but she would be at the same time quick to find out if anyone had designs upon him. Of course you know there is no denying that he would be a brilliant match for any of the young ladies about here, and they know it very well, too. Indeed, her ladyship has mentioned to me the names of one or two in the neighbourhood who have laid themselves open to remark by a little too much attention to him. You know, girls ought to be so very careful.'

There. Miss Dormer might take that, or she might leave it. And it was quite true. Lady Lowater *had* spoken more than once, of the very obvious aims of Lady Belleray and her daughters, so that Miss Pentwistle was not saying more than she could prove.

'There is nothing so unwomanly, is there, Miss Dormer, as for a girl to try to entangle a man of fortune and position?'

'Nothing,' said Valence, cheerily. 'I am quite sure *you* would never try to do it.'

What *did* she mean? Surely this was effrontery. Or had she misunderstood the remark?

'I mean, you know,' Miss Pentwistle continued, 'for a girl to let anyone see she is bent on making a conquest.'

'Ah!' and Valence took out the pins and re-adjusted them. 'I thought you meant that the harm was in being bent upon making the conquest, not in letting other people see it. I should say that if you had got the idea in your mind, that is the unworthy thing. You can't make it any worse by letting other people know it. But I don't believe you would ever do any-

thing of the kind, so we need not talk about it.'

Miss Pentwistle gave a little shrug. Whatever she said ran off like water from a duck's back. If Miss Dormer had any consciousness, she was remarkably clever in concealing it. However, she would push the conversation just one step further and then leave it.

'I think I know who Lady Lowater would prefer,' she remarked.


Now was the time for the young lady's self-possession to fail, if it had any failing in it. Had the fingers which moved so rapidly to and fro over that red curtain given the very faintest indication of a tremble, had the head drooped by a single hair's-breadth, or the clear, rounded cheeks taken the suspicion of a blush upon them, Miss Pentwistle would have known all about it. But even through her spectacles

she could not see anything of the kind.

And then she planted the last stake in the fence which she had been constructing for Sir Merrion's defence by saying, in a quiet, meaning voice:

'The Countess's niece is a very amiable girl. I don't think anything could be more suitable. Have you seen her?'

Valence was able to say that she had, though only at the little church down at the Cove. Not in society, of course. And she said it with an air of apparent comfort. And then, as she was not quite sure of the width of Margaret Dyson's window, she proposed that they should go down to the cottage and measure it.



CHAPTER IX.

MISS PENTWISTLE was relieved.

To do that excellent woman justice, she had had no thought of inflicting pain; she only wished to administer a salutary caution. She was not one of those female Appolyons who go about amongst their young maiden friends, seeking whom they may devour, dragging out with their cruel claws of gossip and slander the tender heart of love, tearing it in pieces and rending it whilst there is none to deliver. She had no wish to set her fangs into any girl's peace, to slay with poison of hint or insinuation the fair, sweet hopes which,

for herself, had long ago faded into the dull past. Had any sign or token on Valence Dormer's part given Miss Pentwistle to understand that she was treading on personal ground, she would have been very sorry, very sorry indeed; she would have gone on and said what she had to say just the same, but she would not have said it from malice, nor from any pleasure in giving pain, but only because she felt the saying of it to be her duty.

And she had now a comfortable assurance that she had done what was necessary without giving that pain. As regarded Sir Merrion Lowater, Miss Dormer's affections were evidently free, and that young lady would probably, after the hint that had been dropped, have the common-sense to keep them so.

Sir Merrion must now be dealt with.

Here again what Miss Pentwistle called

Providence was favourable to her. She was sure it *was* Providence. She would not have been so mean—she said that to herself over and over again—as to take advantage, even in the path of duty, of anything which she could not clearly look upon in that light. And this was how the opportunity came:

Miss Pentwistle was of course a frequent visitor at Margaret Dyson's cottage. Because, though she had the highest opinion of Miss Dornier's ability to minister to the temporal necessities of the afflicted, she was by no means sure that their spiritual necessities would be attended to with equal diligence. That young lady's religious opinions were, so far as she had been able to ascertain them, somewhat of the same hazy nature as Mr. Rock's, most unsuitable for the sick-bed or the house of mourning. And, therefore, seeing that

neither from nurse nor curate was Margaret likely to be helped on her heavenward journey, it was her own bounden duty to repair the shortcomings of both. This she did by a visit to the cottage, paid as regularly as clockwork every Wednesday, at half-past three in the afternoon, and every Saturday at ten in the morning. Those visits, by-and-by, revealed something to Miss Pentwistle. At least she thought they did.

It was necessary, no doubt, and very advisable that Valence Dormer should have a stated time for her daily temporal ministrations at the cottage. In the morning she went in to see how Margaret had passed the night, and to prepare some simple wholesome food for the invalid's mid-day meal, Lady Lowater having now arranged that Ben himself should dine with the men-servants at the Court. Then in the

afternoon she went again to give Margaret her tea, and to make things neat and tidy before the woodman came home. If household cares like these were not attended to at regular times, they might almost as well not be attended to at all, because the uncertainty and anxiety of not knowing when to expect things to be done, was as bad as entire neglect.

But it was not necessary that Mr. Rock should be so methodical in *his* ministrations, nor was it necessary that he should so frequently make them when Miss Dormer was making hers. Indeed, he had not been in the habit of making them so early in the morning or so late in the afternoon at all, before Mrs. Antony's daughter took upon herself the nursing of the case. He would come in about midday, or quite late of an evening, just when he happened to be passing, or when Ben, tidied up after

his long day's work, cared to sit down and have a talk with him.

Lately, however, he had seen fit to make a change. On more than one occasion Miss Pentwistle had met him coming out of the cottage, when she herself was going into it, during Miss Dormer's time of attendance; and not on one or two, but on several occasions, she had, from the rock-seat, which commanded a view of that part of the lane, seen him bending his steps in that direction, disappearing among the lilacs and laburnums, and never coming out again into the road beyond, as of course he would have done if he had been only on his way somewhere else.

Now, did this mean anything or did it not?

If it did mean anything, Miss Pentwistle was quite agreeable. Perhaps he had taken up what she said when they

were having that unpleasant conversation about eternal realities. She had remarked then what a very good thing it would be if Miss Dormer could be persuaded to locate herself permanently in the parish. Had he it in his thoughts to induce her to do so, not primarily as a trainer of skilled nurses for the sick, but as a helpmeet for himself?

Looked at from his point of view, the match would be a suitable one, though at the same time Miss Pentwistle did not believe he would have the remotest chance of success. If Valence Dormer was so blind to the advantages of visiting in the same house with an unappropriated baronet, she was not likely to open her eyes with much favour upon the prospects afforded by a perpetual curate with a nominal salary. Nor would Mrs. Antony, even for the sake of having her daughter

provided for, help matters on by any of those little contrivances which she knew so well how to carry through to a successful issue. Mr. Rock would be disappointed, not a doubt of that, if he were really building up any plans and purposes for the future. But that he should cherish any such plans and purposes at all, was a link in the chain of circumstances which could be made to work in very conveniently with the ends which she herself wished to accomplish.

Miss Pentwistle utilised them accordingly, but not without having first convinced herself that in so doing she was following a path clearly marked out for her by Christian duty. She must always make that plain before she committed herself either to words or actions. Was she called upon to speak? Was she called upon to do? If so, then let people say what they

might, she would not shrink about what was required of her.

So, a day or two after that conversation with Valence Dormer in the library, she put on her garden hat and went down to the hothouses where Sir Merrion was smoking his morning cigar as usual amongst the New Zealand ferns.

Sir Merrion and Miss Pentwistle always got on well together. He had no opinions, to speak of, on religious subjects. Not that that was the secret of their getting on, not at all; but he let her talk about hers, and never contradicted her.

'Have it your own way, Miss Pentwistle, I am sure you know a great deal more about these things than I do.'

That was what he used to say when she got him into serious conversation. One could not call it exactly satisfactory, but it was better than being driven about from

pillar to post, as Mr. Rock drove her. Indeed, she was obliged to let Mr. Rock very much alone now upon such matters. She had a feeling that it was very much like casting your pearls before swine, to have anything to do with him where a theological argument was concerned. He gave such unexpected, and she might say irreverent turns to the conversation. She had never felt able to introduce anything of the sort since that occasion upon which he shocked her by his sentiments as to the topics suitable for sick people. With Sir Merrion it was different. He listened with at least courteous attention. If he would do the same now that the subject was of a still more risky nature, it would be all right.

She opened the conversation in a manner not likely to alarm him.

'Sir Merrion, I think wherever I go

your good deeds are the theme of praise. I have just been to see poor Margaret Dyson, and she is so much obliged to you for those strawberries. To think of your actually going and taking them to her yourself. I believe the attention did her as much good as the fruit.'

Sir Merrion took his cigar out of his mouth, and, stooping down, puffed a quantity of smoke into the face of a frog that was sitting contentedly enough in the midst of a bed of lycopodium.

'That is just what my mother said. She made me go with them myself, or else, you know, making calls upon sick people is not much in my line. To put it mildly, one feels at a loss for conversation.'

Then there is all the more credit due to you, Sir Merrion, for doing it when it is so clearly an act of self-denial.'

'Oh, bother the self-denial. I suppose

one ought to be ready to do a good turn now and then. And mother says she was an awfully good servant when she had the strength.'

'She was a very useful domestic,' replied Miss Pentwistle, with a judicious choice of adjectives which Sir Merrion might or might not profit by. Apparently he did not profit by it.

'I recollect her when I was here before, let me see, three years ago, an awfully jolly sort of person, you know, always cheerful and up to anything you happened to want. It made me feel regularly uncomfortable to see her looking so different yesterday. Sort of gave me quite a start, you know, and then she began to cry when I gave her the strawberries, and what was a fellow to do? I'd rather give a poor woman half-a-sovereign any time than see her begin to cry.'

‘It was weakness, poor thing! But I quite understand your feelings.’

‘Well, no, I don’t think you do. Anyone that’s accustomed to go and see people like that, knows what to say to them to help them to get straight again. Now, I hadn’t the ghost of a notion, and so I just stood like a fool. You see, if one could have sat down comfortably, and amused her with a good story about pig-sticking or anything of that sort. But it wouldn’t have seemed in its right place.’

‘Oh, dear, no! Sir Merriem, not pig-sticking.’

‘Well, do you know, I am not so sure. I was talking to Miss Dormer about it the other day, and she says she believes people make rather a mistake when they are so afraid of saying anything jolly to a sick person. She says it would do Margaret just as much good to hear about my knock-

ing up and down in Cashmere, as to have a chapter in the Bible read to her.'

Miss Pentwistle was shocked. At the same time she was very glad that Sir Merriion had mentioned Miss Dormer's name, and so brought the conversation round to the point from which she wished to work.

The young man continued.

'You know I had been asking her what I could do to cheer up the old girl a bit. I would do anything to please mother, and mother thinks an awful lot about Margaret. Only, you see, when it comes to reading chapters, it doesn't seem to fall in properly, and I was as pleased as Punch when Miss Dormer told me there was no need to do it.'

Miss Pentwistle was anxious to reach the main point, but she could not resist the temptation of pausing by the way, to instruct Sir Merriion as to the things which

ought or ought not to be mentioned in a sick-room.

'Miss Dormer is an exceedingly clever girl,' she replied. 'No one knows that better than I do myself. At the same time I do not consider her a safe guide in matters spiritual. Her opinions are very latitudinarian. I should say they are more the result of temperament than conviction. And you know, Sir Merrion, on these points, conviction, arrived at by conscientious investigation, is all-important.'

Sir Merrion flipped the ashes from the end of his cigar, and looked at Miss Pentwistle as if she had been a specimen in a museum. However did his mother get on with her, day in and day out?

'Well, you know,' he said, 'convictions and that sort of thing don't exactly belong to my line. But, whatever her opinions are, her nursing is very good. Isn't it now?'

'Nursing is Miss Dormer's strong point, Sir Merrion.'

'Yes. That's just it. Jove! how cleverly she did pull me through that nasty accident when I got myself run over by the hansom cab. I don't know if you ever heard about it. A regular mash it was, bones and everything broken, and I had to stop in the hospital a week before there was any moving to be thought of, and, after that, I liked it so well that I said I would stop until I could go on parade again. She was as cool and quiet as a cucumber always, never seemed to be thinking about herself a bit. It wasn't a thing *you* could have done, was it?'

'Sir Merrion,' said Miss Pentwistle, with dignity; 'I hope I shall always be equal to the doing of my duty in any emergency; but I have not had the privilege of such a careful training as Miss Dormer.'

‘Jove! I should think not.’ She’s one in a thousand. I told the doctors she was worth the whole staff of them put together. I believe they thought I was joking, but it’s as true as faith. She won’t hear anything about it now—Miss Dormer won’t, I mean; shuts me up like a spring-trap if ever I mention it.’

‘Of course, Sir Merrion. Under the circumstances she did her duty and no more. Why should we wish to make so much of the simple doing of our duty?’

‘Well, some people do, even when they don’t do it half so well. But you can’t deny that Miss Dormer’s a splendid girl. My mother thinks no end of her, I assure you.’

‘And so do I, Sir Merrion. I consider her remarkably superior. And Lady Lowater is really excessively kind to her.’

In fact, I sometimes think too kind. You see when a girl has been brought up in a different class of society, and then is introduced into the midst of unaccustomed luxuries and refinements——

‘Well, but she is a lady, and they always have luxuries and all that sort of thing. Mother isn’t giving her anything that she hasn’t had all her life, I suppose.’

‘Oh, dear, Sir Merriam! you are quite mistaken. Mrs. Antony was in very straitened circumstances before she married a third time.’

‘A third time! Jove! I should think she scarcely knows herself amongst so many names. I went and called of course, after I got out of the hospital, and I thought everything seemed very tidy and ship-shape, lots of pretty little gim-cracks, and all that sort of thing, you know.’

‘Oh, yes! Mrs. Antony always kept a genteel appearance. Indeed——

And now Miss Pentwistle thought she might introduce an important element into the conversation; doubt about Mrs. Antony's antecedents. For she had her doubts.

‘Indeed, she is one of those women who have a remarkable talent for making the best of things. And also she has the ability to adapt herself to a gradual rise in the social scale.’

‘What do you mean? Married above herself?’

‘Well, no,’ replied Miss Pentwistle, dubiously, ‘perhaps not that exactly. I have gathered from certain facts that have come under my notice that Captain Dormer was perhaps a little her superior in the social scale. At any rate, his own friends have not taken much notice of her.’

‘Oh, that doesn’t go for much. Quarrelled, maybe. She’s a sort of woman that would hold her own pretty tightly. But he was a gentleman, no mistake about that. He was in our regiment, you know, and there’s an old sergeant that remembers him, says he was one of the finest officers that ever stepped. And I can tell you a man in the ranks always knows how to spot a gentleman.

Miss Pentwistle would have liked to set the young baronet straight about his vocabulary again, but that just now was not the most important point to be attended to.

‘Yes. I have noticed that people in the lower walks of life have sometimes a singular facility in discerning their superiors. It is to me one of the hopeful signs of the times. I wish that gentlemen had always the same discernment in perceiving their

own equals, I mean where marriage is their intention. Captain Dormer would have been happier, no doubt, with a woman of his own rank. Unequal alliances are a fatal mistake.'

Sir Merrión twirled his moustache.

'I don't know that. I think if you can find a girl that suits you in her temper and her style and her general set-up, a touch of difference in who her people might happen to be doesn't count for much. At least I shouldn't trouble about it. I think a man has a right to please himself.'

That was unpromising, decidedly unpromising. Had Sir Merrión any personal meanings? If so, Miss Pentwistle must bring up her reserve forces and make the attack from another direction. And most fortunately just then, as she stood at the hot-house door, a position she had taken up in

order that Sir Merrion's cigar-smoke might not annoy her, she caught sight of Valence Dornier, with a little basket in her hand, going across the terrace to the plantation path which led to Margaret's cottage.

CHAPTER X.

THAT served to turn the conversation.

‘Dear me,’ remarked Miss Pentwistle, ‘what a long time we must have been talking. There is Miss Dormer setting off to make her usual morning visit to Margaret Dyson, and she never starts till half-past ten. I just thought to turn aside and have five minutes’ chat with you before beginning to make up the accounts, and here we must have been nearly an hour. I am afraid I have bored you.’

Sir Merrion did not reply. He was watching the young girl as she stepped along so lightly and firmly; a blossom her-

self for freshness, amongst the blossoming trees. And he did not so much as turn to Miss Pentwistle, or vouchsafe any reply to her remark until Valence was out of sight amongst the plantation shrubs.

'And she's going to Dyson's cottage, is she?' he said at last. 'Jove! Margaret's a lucky old girl. I shall tell her so.'

'She is exceedingly fortunate, Sir Merriem, to be so carefully nursed. Of course, nothing permanent can be done for an invalid in her case, but Lady Lowater's kindness is smoothing her path to the grave.'

'I should say it is Miss Dornier's kindness which is doing that. She's awfully good to her, never seems to get tired or out of patience. And if it's time to go to the cottage she won't let anything stop her. She's off like a shot.'

Now Miss Pentwistle could put it in. She might not perhaps have such a favourable opportunity again.

‘Mr. Rock is most unremitting in his attentions too, Sir Merrion.’

The young man turned and looked at her. It was not so much the words as the manner of saying them. And in this case love quickened his perceptions to note what otherwise scarcely called for comment.

‘Rock? Rock? Why, that’s the little parson. You say he goes to the cottage too.’

‘With the utmost regularity, Sir Merrion. At least he has done so since Miss Dormer began to visit Margaret Dyson.’

‘And do you mean to say he is flying his colours in that direction?’

Oh, dear! Sir Merrion, I have no-

thing at all to do with that. I only say he goes every morning, and just about the time, too, that Miss Dormer is finishing her duties at the cottage. It may be only a coincidence, or it may be more.

Sir Merriem stooped down and sent a second puff of cigar-smoke into the face of the frog who was sitting amongst the lycopodium. This time the creature seemed to think that something must be done. With a ludicrous expression of disgust it raised itself on its hind legs, gave a few gulps and winks, and then with slow, dignified motion stalked over into the next pot, which happened to be one of maiden-hair.

'No, not that, old fellow,' said Sir Merriem. 'You must move on a bit further.'

And picking up a dead leaf he kept nudging the protesting frog with it, until with a great flop the amphibian plunged

into a tank of tepid water, overshadowed with lilies.

'There now, you'll do. Folks like you should stick to their own regiment; exchanges don't answer. And so you say Mr. Rock goes to the cottage, Miss Pentwistle. I wonder how Miss Dormer likes it. Talk about inequality, why, I should say *that* is unequal enough, at any price. He's nothing but a perpetual curate, is he?'

'He may not always be a perpetual curate. Sir Merriem.'

'Well, but he can't be one at all if he isn't always one,' said the young baronet, with non-ecclesiastical perplexity. 'Pon my word, I thought they called them perpetual curates because they stuck at that and never got any further. Sort of mild joke, you know, but not much of a joke for the perpetual, when it means ninety-

seven pounds a year. Awfully pinching, isn't it? Can't think how he contrives to make a living out of it. I know my cigars cost me a lot more than that, and I'm not an extravagant man, either.'

'Oh, dear no! Sir Merrion. I have never heard anyone say that of you.'

'Old Antony says it, though. He's a scraper, is old Antony, if ever there was one. We generally manage to make a brush of it between us when I come home, but I've kept clear of him this time, so far. You see it vexes mother if I cut-up rough with him, because she thinks he's necessary about the place. However, I tell her he is no master here, and never shall be. If a man is master in his own house, that's enough.'

But Miss Pentwistle could enlighten him a little, and she was quite ready to do so.

'They say Mr. Antony is scarcely that now, Sir Merrion.'

'What, scarcely master in his own house? Jove! you don't say so. Has to knock under to the missis, eh? Well, serves him right. There isn't a man living has a better right to be flattened down than Clayton Antony, Esquire, of the Elms. And if his wife flattens him, so much the better, because the treatment can be always going on. I wonder if she used to flatten Miss Dormer too, when she was at home.'

'I really do not know, Sir Merrion. I should fancy Miss Dormer has got a temper as well as her mother.'

'All the better for her if she has. I wouldn't give a fig for a girl who couldn't stand up for herself. Goodness knows they have need enough to do it as times go. I daresay she is a great deal more

comfortable earning her own living.'

'That depends.'

'Depends upon what?'

'I think a woman is always happier when some one else is earning her living for her. Only the stipend here is so very small.'

'Stipend? Oh, you're at Mr. Rock again. Bother Mr. Rock! I'll give him Perry Point, just over the hill, next time it falls vacant, for the sake of getting him out of the way.'

'Would it not be more to the purpose if you increased his stipend here, where, no doubt, under the circumstances, he would prefer remaining.'

The young baronet faced round upon her.

'I say, Miss Pentwistle, what do you mean? Is he engaged to her? I'll go right out and ask him.'

'Oh, Sir Merrion,' and Miss Pentwistle began to feel really alarmed, for that would spoil everything. She only wanted him to think he was treading on somebody else's ground, not to go so far as to make inquiries. A man of honour would stop of course at the first hint that anyone was in the field before him. 'Oh! Sir Merrion you must not do anything so ridiculous. I only mention what has suggested itself to my own mind. And in that case an increase of stipend would be a most acceptable offer.'

'It would be acceptable anyway, I should think. But when I settle down on the estate I had rather he went somewhere else. Fancy the nuisance of a parson that doesn't know a bit of good horse-flesh when he sees it, and can't tell a pheasant from a sitting hen. One might as well give the living to a dissenter. He

has no business to think about such a girl as Valence Dormer.'

It had come to using her name, had it, then?

'Miss Dormer is the best judge of that matter herself,' said Miss Pentwistle, rather stiffly.

'No, she isn't. She doesn't think half enough about herself. I don't believe she knows a bit what a fine-looking girl she is. I never saw one better set-up and all that sort of thing. She carries herself like a grenadier.'

'Yes. And I believe she would make a most economical wife for a man of small means.'

'Small means, indeed! There, you're at it again. I won't rest till I've had it out with him. I'll tell him it's a downright shame.'

'Sir Merrion, I beg you will not do

anything of the sort. What I have said may be only report.'

'Then why did you say it? You seemed to know all about everything.'

'Excuse me, Sir Merrion. I don't think I have really said anything at all. We had better leave the young people to manage their own affairs.'

'Do you mean to say there isn't any truth in it?'

'I do not know anything whatever, Sir Merrion. I only spoke, and perhaps hastily, from my own observation. Do, pray, forget what I have been saying.'

'All right. I am sure I have no objection. And my memory is bad enough, in a general way. You say Miss Dormer has just gone down to the cottage.'

'Yes, a few moments ago.'

Sir Merrion stretched himself; watched the frog flopping about amongst the weed

at the bottom of the tank; began to pull off the little green leaves of the maiden-hair fern; then stopped suddenly, as if a bright idea had come into his mind.

'I wonder if there are any more strawberries ready?'

'Oh, dear, yes!' said Miss Pentwistle, innocently. 'The gardener says we shall have a regular succession of them now.'

'Then I'll take Margaret Dyson another basketful. Mother likes me to be attentive to her. Good-morning.'

And raising his cap, and flinging away his cigar, the young baronet went off towards the kitchen-garden, leaving Miss Pentwistle to digest her own thoughts as comfortably as might be. The mischief was done.

CHAPTER XI.

ON his way to the strawberry beds, Sir Merrion overtook his mother, pacing up and down the croquet lawn.

‘Well, my boy,’ she said, as he shortened his steps to keep time with hers and took her hand upon his arm. Merrion had very pleasant ways with his mother. His off-hand free-and-easiness fell from him in her presence, or rather was veiled with a certain chivalrous deference. Only it peeped out now and then in a word or two of the sort to which Lady Lowater was not accustomed. ‘Well, my boy, your cigar has kept you a long time this morn-

ing. I thought we were to have had a stroll up to the next plantation to see how the young pheasants were getting on.'

'My cigar, mother? Nay, it was Miss Pentwistle that kept me; she has been giving me the length of a sermon yonder in the hothouses. I wonder how you stand it always. It seems to me one need not go to church with her on the premises.'

'Perhaps it is because she is on the premises that one needs to go oftener,' said my lady, with a careless smile.

'Oh! I see. To pray for patience. Well, one needs it, certainly. Don't you find her an awful bore?'

'No, Merrion; I am accustomed to it. Things don't bore me as they would you.'

'Don't they, mother? You look as if something bored you pretty much all the time. Is the place getting too much for you? Does that fellow Antony interfere?'

If he does, Jove! I'll soon make him know what he is about, a sneaking, low-bred fellow!

‘Hush, Merrion, it is no use making quarrels. I daresay Mr. Antony does what he thinks to be his duty. Any little interference does not trouble me now. He is a good sort of fellow in his way, and, as long as I have you, I am content.’

Merrion laid his hand upon his mother's as she said this, and she looked into his face with almost a light of content in her poor weary eyes.

For she was very fond of her boy. All the brightness that could come into her life at all came through him. He was not brilliant, she knew that, not intellectual, not exceptionably noble; but there were no meannesses about him, no degrading faults, as yet, to make anyone despise him. And he loved her as none other did.

If she could but keep the peace between him and the man whom he looked upon as a sneak and an intruder, all might yet be well. And things did seem tending in that direction now. If she had any woman's wit at all, Lady Lowater thought she knew where his heart was finding for itself a home. Mr. Antony, in that case, for the sake of his own peace and honour, would surely be silent. To have his wife's daughter mistress of Lowater Court would be in itself a defence against anything that the man might do to injure Merrion's interests. He was not one to humiliate others, when the humiliation rebounded upon himself. His own position in the neighbourhood, his own reputation would stand or fall then with the good name of the Lowaters; Merrion wedded to Valence Dormer meant more than a good wife to him, it meant a veil of merciful si-

lence spread over all the unhappy past.

'As long as I have you, I am content, my boy, however bored I may look. Do not trouble yourself about me.'

Merrion took his mother's hand into his own, and played with her wedding-ring. It hung loosely now upon her thin finger. Lady Lowater shivered, even in the June sunshine, but she did not take her hand away.

'I tell you what,' the young man said: 'you may talk as you like about being content, but, as long as you are as lean as a bamboo cane, I shall not believe a word you say. Why, with nothing to do and nobody to vex you, you ought to carry your eleven stone like a begum. Content, indeed! Now look here, little mother—'

'Little mother.' It was not exactly the epithet one would have expected to hear applied to the stately, dignified woman

who stepped so proudly by her son's side. But she liked it. The hard look upon her face never melted into a smile so gracious as when Merriam called her by that name.

'I tell you what, little mother, I see it as plainly as can be. You want somebody bright and young and bonnie to keep you company here. Isn't it so?'

'Nay, to keep *you* company, my boy. That is what you mean,' said my Lady Lowater.

'Very well, then, to keep us both company, if you like to have it so. You know, since I came home, I've been thinking it over, and I've come to the conclusion that it wouldn't be half a bad thing if I sold out and settled down on the land and we were all comfortable together.'

'All *two* of us,' said the 'little mother,' with a lurking smile in her grey eyes.

The young man's cheek flushed.

‘Oh! of course one would take that for granted. When a fellow settles down, it means getting married. You would like that, wouldn't you?’

‘Indeed I would, Merriem. Anything that would be for your happiness would be for mine too. You may trust me for that.’

And then the two walked on for a few minutes in silence, past the roses that bordered the croquet lawn, past the laburnum walk where the long green plumes of seed pods swept almost to the ground, past the coops where the patient hens were tending their foster families, and on towards the bit of sloping, sunny ground that was given up to the strawberry plants.

‘Mother,’ said Sir Merriem, ‘is Mr. Rock going to be married?’

Lady Lowater started; her thoughts

were far away. She never went past those coops without remembering the miserable words she had been obliged to listen to from Mr. Antony, one afternoon not so long ago, when she met him there.

‘Mr. Rock going to be married, Merrion! What put such an idea into your head? I should think he is the very last man in the world to contemplate such a thing.’

‘He isn’t engaged either, is he, then?’

‘I really don’t know. If he were, I don’t suppose he would tell me about it. But I have never heard a whisper about any such thing. He must marry a girl with money, if he marries at all, and there are none here.’

‘No, that’s just what I was thinking. At the same time, it is rather hard lines for a man to have got to his time of life and not to be able to marry a wife, unless

he marries money with her. I'll give him Perry Point next time it falls vacant.'

'You could not give it to a better man,' said my lady, unsuspiciously, 'though I should be very sorry to lose him from our own church. But who told you he was engaged?'

'Nobody.'

'Oh! I thought you had been hearing some gossip about him. I am very glad: he is not a man one would like to have mixed up with anything of that sort. I am sure there is no truth in it.'

'And yet, mother, a fellow must marry some time or other.'

'The fellow being yourself,' Merrion. Yes, of course he must. And, as I said before, I shall be very glad, for your sake, when it comes to pass.'

Merrion paused. Then he said,

I don't think I should care about money, if my wife was a lady.'

'And I should not care about it for you,' his mother replied. 'I have no wish but that you should marry the woman you love, so long as she is worthy of you, whether she be rich or poor.'

They were standing by the gate in the mossy wall of the kitchen garden. Lady Lowater looked away down the sloping ground, past the larch planting to Ben Dyson's cottage, where the gleam of a pink dress could be seen now and then in the porch. Turning towards Merrion, she saw that his gaze had wandered in the same direction. Their eyes met, and a bright, sunny smile overspread his face.

'Mother, you have found me out.'

It was not the smile that comes with a great hope fulfilled; not the smile of a

conquering will which has set itself to the best it knows of noble and good; not the smile of victory after hard toil and unrest. These things had not come into Merrion Lowater's life as yet. But he had found a bright, young girl, and she pleased him, and he felt that she drew out what was best in him, made him glad in himself, stronger to enjoy life. Also, to one of his kindly nature, there was joy in the thought of all that he had to give her.

'You have found me out, mother. I made up my mind more than a week ago. I have not said anything to her yet, for I wanted to talk to you about it first, but I believe she is the right wife for me.'

'And I believe so too,' said Lady Lowater, with a feeling at her heart more akin to gladness than she had known for many a year. For now the past would be secure, the future guarded by identity

of interests between her boy and the only man who had power to injure him. 'Valence Dormer is poor, but she is a lady born, and she will live her life as beautifully at your side as she has lived it amongst those suffering people in the hospital wards at Hurchester. Merrion, I give you joy, and I give you it with all my heart.'

And Lady Lowater never thought—what mother does?—that the girl her son had honoured with his love could take the offer of it with other than the purest gratitude.

And as for Sir Merrion—well, he knew he had much to give, and he knew he was giving it generously. If he did praise himself a little for passing by rank and fortune and accomplishments to give his hand and heart to genuine womanly worth, the praise was only what most men

would have allowed. He was doing a noble thing. There was no harm, surely, in knowing it.

'She may do what she likes with me, mother,' he said, when that little silence was over which comes after the telling of any great thing. 'You know I don't go in for being a man of intellect and all that sort of thing, it never was much in my line; but if she likes to make improvements on the estate, you know, do up the cottages and look after drainage and ventilation and heaps of things that I don't care for a bit, I shall never stand in her way. It will be no end of a relief to have a wife that you can leave it all to.'

'I am sure you may leave it to Valence, Merrion; she has the sense of a man and the tact of a woman. You need never be afraid to trust her.'

'I don't think I need, mother. Only

she mustn't interfere with the game. You know I can't stand anyone setting the farmers' backs up about the foxes and that sort of thing. It doesn't do. A man likes his hunting and his shooting let alone.'

Lady Lowater smiled. Miss Dormer had slightly radical notions as to the rights which a farmer had over his own wheat and chickens when he had been at the trouble of rearing them. And she had expressed her feelings pretty freely, too, about the loving-kindness or otherwise of hunting foxes and tearing them to death for amusement. But there was no need to say anything about that now. Doubtless it would be all set right afterwards.

'Valence will not interfere with anything that affects your comfort. I am sure of that, Merrion. She knows what

belongs to a wife's place, and she has too much good sense to go beyond it. You need not be afraid.'

'No, mother; she's a sensible girl, though she has a spirit of her own. But it isn't a temper like her mother's. Jove! they do say Mrs. Antony pulls her husband up tight. He does not dare to say three and two make five, unless she gives him leave. A poor sort of way that for a man.'

'It is just the way that he deserves, Merrion, so I am not sorry for him. But Valence has none of the Antony blood in her veins. Her father was a gentleman.

'Yes, as good a one as ever stepped. That old sergeant in our regiment says so. I wonder who her mother was. Do you know?'

'No. But I have no doubt she is all right. Not what I should call a thorough-

ly well-bred woman, but very well, as they go. Nothing to be ashamed of.'

'Except her temper. I should be ashamed of that if she belonged to me. Miss Pentwistle is awfully rough upon her. Says she doesn't believe she is a lady at all.'

Lady Lowater could quite understand that. Miss Pentwistle never failed to say something spiteful about anyone who had offended her. She had set out by being a worshipper of Mrs. Antony's elegance, and Mrs. Antony in return professed to worship Miss Pentwistle's benevolence. But, now that the worship was over, antagonism had set in on both sides.

'I think, Merriem, you may take a good deal off anything that Miss Pentwistle says about Mrs. Antony. The two ladies have a standing feud. You had better let them alone. Miss Pentwistle would

like to prove that Mrs. Antony is an upstart, and Mrs. Antony would like to prove that Miss Pentwistle is a hypocrite. Neither will rest until she has made out a case to her own satisfaction.'

'Jove! what a pleasant state of things. Then you think Mrs. Antony is all right.'

'Oh, dear, yes. Quite right enough. You know Mr. Antony married her entirely for the sake of getting a better position upon the strength of her good family. And they visit all the people about here. I don't think you need be afraid.'

'And you are sure, mother, you don't care about Valence not having any money.'

Lady Lowater looked her son in the face.

'My dear Merrion, I am a great deal more than content. I am very happy. I love Valence as a daughter already, let her

be who and what she may. I am sure you have done well.'

And if Miss Pentwistle could have seen the joy which danced and sparkled in the young baronet's eyes, as he went through into the kitchen-garden to gather Margaret Dyson's strawberries, she would have felt that she had much better have let things alone.

CHAPTER XII.

THE summer days passed on. Sir Merriem did not wish to hurry matters. Indeed, why should he, when he had no doubt of his position? And most young men know what a pleasure there is in the love which is as yet unavowed; how a certain haze of romance is for ever swept away when the thing has once crystallised into an engagement, become as it were the property of society in general. Besides, the young baronet was tolerably sure that many of his friends would take him to task about it. He was not making what could be called a brilliant mar-

riage, though one admirably calculated to promote his real happiness. So, rather than have to defend himself against the officious interference of would-be advisers, he preferred to keep his affairs to himself and not take the outer world into his confidence until the wedding-day was fixed.

Miss Pentwistle's state of mind alternated between hopes and fears. She had done her best. She was doing it still by judicious hints and whispers, let fall as opportunity offered, but she could not be quite sure how things were moving. If the Rev. Stephen Rock, who, however, kept himself very much in the background now, had been half so pronounced in his attentions to any young lady as Sir Merriam was in the little courtesies which he offered to Miss Dormer, she should have said without a doubt that there was an

understanding between them. But then a word from Mr. Rock meant a great deal, and many words from Sir Merrion might mean very little, the two men being so different.

Besides, Sir Merrion did not seem at all anxious about his position, as a lover might do whose happiness was as yet in the balance. He never lost an opportunity of being by Miss Dormer's side; but when there his manner betrayed none of the tender solicitude of the man who watches every look and tone and gesture, to gather hope or discouragement from each. He was always bright, always sunny, full of plans and purposes concerning what was to be done during his furlough, letting drop a word or two sometimes which seemed to point to no very distant change in his manner of life; but, as for anything

definite, Miss Pentwistle could not lay her finger upon it.

As for Miss Dormer, she went about as usual. No one could tell what hopes she was cherishing, or whether she was cherishing any at all, beyond the simple doing of her duty. One thing Miss Pentwistle had found out, namely, that Mr. Rock never went to the cottage now, except when he expected to find Margaret Dyson alone. That looked as if he had a suspicion that any hopes he might have been cherishing were vain. Had Miss Dormer actually refused him? Or had she given him to understand that he was presumptuous? Poor man! If he had asked her, Miss Pentwistle, anything about it, she could have set him right at the very beginning, Mrs. Antony being far too wise a woman to allow her daughter

to marry a perpetual curate, when there was a baronet to be had for the seeking.

Did Lady Lowater know? If so, she quite approved. There was something almost motherly in her treatment of Valence Dormer now. And, though the young lady had been at the Court three weeks, not a word was said about the termination of her visit. And, during the whole of the time, Sir Merrion had been dangling after her in a manner which was cruel, if he had no serious intentions. Lady Lowater was not the person to let a girl be behaved to in that manner even by her own son. Either she was perfectly blind, or her eyes were open wide enough to see everything that was going on. Miss Pentwistle could only be patient.

Indeed, so far from anything being said about the termination of the visit, events seemed rather to point to an indefi-

nite extension of it. For arrangements were now being made for a series of garden-parties at the Court during the month of July, that sort of entertainment being preferred by Lady Lowater to anything which involved having people in the house. Dinner company she could not bear, nor did Sir Merrion care much about it. He liked to spend most of his time out of doors, and he did not enjoy being shut up to one person for very long at a time, unless, as Miss Pentwistle could not help observing, that person happened to be Valence Dormer. And of course her social rank did not admit, as yet, of a place by the young baronet's side at a dinner entertainment. So Lady Lowater had decided, after due consultation with him, that what they did in the way of hospitality during his visit home, should be done out of doors.

And she had proposed to Miss Dormer, and in Miss Pentwistle's presence too, that the young lady should stay for those garden-parties; meaning a good month or six weeks longer away from the Hurchester hospital. She had not proposed it either, as if she were laying Valence under any obligation. Rather, she asked it as a favour, because she said it would make things so much pleasanter. It was always convenient, she said, at a garden-party to have several people who could take upon themselves the responsibility of being minor hostesses, so that little knots of people might be gathered together and carried off to various parts of the grounds where there was anything interesting to see, thus avoiding stiffness and the tedium inseparable from a concourse of guests who had nothing to engage their attention.

Miss Dormer had given in very cheerfully to the extension of her visit. Doubtless she was glad of a plausible reason for staying on, because Margaret Dyson was not likely to afford a pretext for it much longer. The poor thing was sinking rapidly now. Any day might be her last, the doctor said. If the weather changed suddenly to heat, it would be most serious for her. Nothing, he said, was so bad for a patient in her situation as sudden changes in the weather, either from heat to cold or from cold to heat. And what could one expect but changes, before the summer had really set in? Miss Dormer must know that, having been nurse in a hospital where advanced consumptive cases were admitted, and so she would be the more ready to avail herself of any opportunity of lengthening a visit which

might be productive of such pleasant results to herself.

Lady Lowater *must* see. It was too much to hope that she was indifferent, quite too much to hope that she was only urging Valence to stay for her own convenience in the entertainment of the guests. Miss Pentwistle felt quite sure that she and the young baronet between them could have made the garden-parties go off successfully enough, even if Lady Lowater had stayed in her own room all the afternoon with a headache, a thing she was very fond of doing when entertainments of that kind were going on. Miss Pentwistle had not been at the Court for fifteen years without feeling her own position there sufficiently to supply the place of the hostess at a moment's notice. She had done it over and over again, the entertainment, luncheon, or dinner, or afternoon-

tea, or whatever it might chance to be, being got through just as pleasantly as if Lady Lowater had been there herself. Why should a third person be required now except to gratify Sir Merrion, who, to speak the plain truth about him, was making a fool of himself?

However, it was a case in which direct action was useless. Again Miss Pentwistle said to herself that she could only be patient.

Those were dreary days for father and daughter at the woodman's cottage. Margaret was indeed now rapidly fading to her death; and Ben, as he toiled one evening on his bit of potato-land, toiled wearily and with a faint heart for the loneliness so near him, was smitten down by paralysis. Stephen Rock, who was within call when the stroke came upon him, helped him into the cottage, and stayed there until the

village doctor could be brought. And all that the village doctor could say was, that Ben Dyson, until his dying day, would be as helpless as a little child.

Both Lady Lowater and Sir Merriion were very good to the poor man, but it was Mr. Rock who did for him what money could not do. Every day now he went to the woodman's cottage, and tended him there where he lay in his little room next to Margaret's. Ben's speech and faculties were left to him, but his limbs were useless. He lay there moaning and sorrowing, suffering as a proud man does when he knows that all comes to him from charity. He had worked steadily and lived hardily, and all that he loved were gone or going from him, and the end of his toil was that strangers were about him, and that none would stand by his grave,

when the time came, to drop so much as a tear of regret for him.

'It isn't as it ought to have been, sir,' he would say to Mr. Rock, as the good curate ministered to him—but always in Valence Donner's absence—with the tenderness of a son. 'It isn't as it ought to have been. There was another of 'em, and she should ha' done it for me, same as you're doing now.'

'Would you like me to make any inquiries about her, Ben? We ought to be able to find her out.'

'Nay, nay, sir; you don't need to trouble. She's been gone this many a year. I make no doubt but she's a fine enough ady now.'

'If she is, then it is her duty to do something for you. Can you not tell me anything about her? And I may perhaps

be able to find out the rest. She ought to be made to come to you.'

The old man's eyes flamed with proud disdain, and he tried to clench his feeble hands.

'Come to me? Nay, sir! I'll have none of her. She's been ashamed of her poor old father long enough, and she may end with it, for aught I'll do to mend her mind. I don't want it for myself, it's only poor Margaret as it lies heavy upon, and Miss Valence, bless her, is better to Margaret than ever your fine Libbie would ha' been, with her silks and her satins as I don't doubt she has them now. The Lord in heaven reward Miss Valence with the best palm branch as ever an angel carried. And, if she can get her due before they make an angel of her, butter and better. I'm always glad when I hear tell of good

folk getting their blessing afore we've done with 'em.'

Stephen Rock, sitting there by the bedside, patiently feeding the helpless old man with bread-and-milk which he had himself prepared for him, could not but smile. And he wondered whether Valence Dormer was to have her blessing by being made the lady of Lowater Court. For he had watched her and Sir Merriem together, and he had read the young man's meaning in his looks and tones. And was that then how the end should be? Not more than she deserved, as riches and honour go. Yet the thought of it gave Stephen Rock, even while he smiled, the sharpest pang he had ever known.

That was why Miss Pentwistle never saw him at the cottage now, when Valence Dormer was there. And Miss Pentwistle thought she understood.

But as there was no certainty, and as nothing more could be done, Miss Pentwistle fell back upon that other mystery, the antecedents of Mrs. Antony. She must, somehow or other, find out who she was and where she came from.

Of course, since Miss Pentwistle had given Mrs. Antony to understand that she knew all about that Queen Anne inkstand, the two ladies had hated each other with the utmost diligence, and anything which made that hatred consistent with facts on either side was eagerly welcomed. This it was which made Miss Pentwistle fasten with such interest upon Valence Dormer's admission that she had never known anything of her father's family. Of course that was because they did not care for the wife he had chosen. And they did not care for her because she was of a lower social rank than themselves. Miss Pent-

wistle had seen from the first, or at least almost from the first, that she was not a well-bred woman. Numberless little mistakes and omissions proclaimed that fact to anyone of close observation. Indeed, if Mrs. Antony had not had remarkably good taste in dress, and a certain natural elegance of manner which one might find in a milkmaid upon occasion, she would never have got into society at all ; or, if she had got into it, she would have fallen out again when she had no longer a husband like Captain Dormer by her side, to secure a position for her.

Who could her first husband have been ? Who was she before she married at all ? And why was it that she never had any of her relations staying with her ? As to Captain Dormer's, Miss Pentwistle knew the reason of their absence. They did not acknowledge her. But then a woman who

had been so extensively married was not dependent on the relatives of one husband for visitors, who might be considered as guarantees of her respectability. Whatever society a woman got into, it was always more satisfactory if she had, from time to time, guests in her own house belonging to her own people, who were unmistakably of a good sort. And such Mrs. Antony had not yet been able to produce. There was a mystery about her. And Miss Pentwistle determined that she would not rest until, by some means or other, that mystery had been cleared up.

CHAPTER XIII

WITH the blossoming roses of early summer, death, long looked for, came to Margaret Dyson. They buried her one July morning, beside her mother in Lowater churchyard, old Ben Dyson's bed having been moved to the open window of his little room, that he might look out and see them carry her to her rest. Valence, who had tended her to the last, and who in the name of all who had ever loved her kissed the shut eyelids and laid white lilies upon the weary hands as she lay in her coffin, followed Margaret to her grave, there being none of her own kith and kin.

to do it. And then she came back to the old man and promised him that, whilst she could, she would tend him as she had tended his daughter. It was the last word she had given to the dying woman. Even as the woodman's daughter listened to it, she smiled and laid her head back, and there came upon her brow that strange calm which is known once only in any life.

Her funeral chanced the day of Lady Lowater's first garden-party. Valence stayed all the afternoon with Ben in his lonely cottage, the old man telling her of his past life, and his anxieties and his sorrows, and how one who should have made them lighter had gone away from him. He had never spoken of his daughter Libbie to Valence Doryner before, but his pride seemed broken down a little now. It was a relief to him, none other being

there to watch, to go back upon the past, and ask from a stranger the sympathy which the newly dead could no longer give.

'Is it long since your other daughter left you, Ben?' she asked, stepping about in the little room, and brightening it with cheerful touches here and there, as before she had brightened Margaret's.

'A matter of five-and-twenty years, miss, more or less. It was a good bit afore her mother died, and she's been laid in the churchyard twenty years come next barley harvest. And I've never heard no tell on her since. Only that I'm safe sure she's doing well for herself, for if she hadn't there's plenty would have brought us the news. You don't never need to wait long for anything you'd better not hear.'

And she used to live at the Court.

What a pity she did not stay ; Lady Lowater is such a kind mistress.'

'Yes, Miss Valence, kind enough, but it isn't the mistress as rules what is to be and what isn't to be, when there's a man, like old Sir Guy used to be, at the back. I've no doubt my lady saw it, she being one that had a sharp eye, yes, and needed it where there was a pretty girl anywheres about in her husband's way. And she sent for my missis one night, and told her there'd better be a change, and a change there was, fast enough, for neither me nor my missis needed twice telling, being as we'd heard a whisper what the old baronet was. And we took Libbie home that very next day, and by the week end we'd heard tell of a place to suit her off at Crumbleby, a hundred and fifty miles away ; and there she went maid-of-all-

work at ten pound a year. It wasn't the wage she could have had at the Court, not by a long way, but that wasn't what me and my missis looked at, as long as she was safe out of harm's way.'

'I should think not. And did she never come to see you again?'

'Wait a bit, miss, and you'll see. She hadn't been there a twelvemonth before she wrote and told us she was going to do better for herself, because she'd got a place in a ladies' school. And just a half-a-year afterwards she wrote again, and told us she was wed to a young man as had lived lodger with her missis. And we wasn't to trouble ourselves about her, she said, for she was safe wed at the church, with everything proper, as we might find out for ourselves, if we'd a mind to.'

And did you? asked Valence, not with-

out a feeling of interest in the pretty little adventuress who was so capable of looking after herself.

Yes, miss, after a bit, when I was able to raise the money. It isn't all of a sudden that a poor man like me can set himself off the length of a hundred and fifty miles, but I did it at the last, with pinching and saving, and I got to where the lady lived that she'd been maid-of-all-work to, and it was a young doctor she'd married, and he'd sent her to school first—which was what she hadn't liked to tell us, you see, putting it as if it had been a situation she'd gone to. But her, we didn't see, for the lady told us she'd gone right away after she was wed, and more than that she was wed safe and fast and right she wasn't able to tell me. So I come away. And from that day to this I've heard no tell of her; no, nor ever shall now.'

'Oh! yes, you might, Ben, if you set any clever person to work about it. People can always be heard of sooner or later, unless they are dead. What was the name of the person she married?'

'Suthell, miss. And very respectable the lady said he was. I'm thinking he was so respectable he didn't want anything to do with a poor lot like us, down here. And Libbie, she's a rare one to kick down the ladder when she's got to the top. You may trust her for that.'

'There is only one thing bothers me, miss,' continued the old man, turning uneasily, and with a fierce, resentful light in his dim eyes. 'There was nothing for it but to go on the parish when I got my stroke, and Mr. Antony, miss, you see he's one of the poor-law guardians, and he come to see me only a bit since, and he says it

wasn't right as I should be taking the parish money when I'd them belonging me as could afford my keep. May the Lord in Heaven forgive me, miss, but I told him I didn't doubt but what she was dead. Ay, and I'd rather she was, a deal, than I should eat bite or sup of hers, and her leaving her mother and Margaret and me to die like this. And I won't be took out of this cottage, not till I'm took to the churchyard, let Mr. Antony do his best about it. You'll excuse me saying so, miss, and him as near to you as he is, though I don't doubt but what there's many says the parish money ought not to go so. I don't mind dying a bit, but I won't take nought from Libbie, not if I knows it. And I'm sure, miss, if you'd speak to Lady Lowater, she would stand 'Ay me.'

'I will speak,' said Valence. 'I will

‘speak to her to-night. If I can keep you from trouble, I will.’

The old man settled himself down again.

‘Then I shall lie as easy as a babe, miss. There’s some if they say they will; it don’t go but a very little way towards your comfort, and there’s others if they say they will, you may rest upon it like the very Bible itself. And you’re that sort, Miss Dormer. Mr. Rock says it, and he should know.’

But Valence made no reply to that, only shook up Ben’s pillows, and then went into the kitchen to prepare tea for him.

Meanwhile Lady Lowater’s guests were amusing themselves as best they might amongst the lawns and shrubberies and flower-paths of the beautiful old grounds.

Mrs. Antony was there. And, what was better still, she had contrived to attach

herself to Lady Lowater, and was now, in full view of the Bellerays and the Murray-Mortimers and the Countess of Muchmarsh, sitting beside her ladyship on a rustic bench where there was only room for two. It was quite a little triumph for her, and, if she wanted anything to make it more complete, Sir Merrion had asked her, only that morning, if he might be allowed to mount Miss Dormer on a very quiet pony, and give her a few lessons in riding. If she had herself been entrusted with the arrangement of the bits of coloured glass in the kaleidoscope of her destiny, she could not have formed them into a more effective pattern.

• Miss Dormer is at the cottage with old Ben Dyson this afternoon,' her ladyship began. 'The poor man feels dreadfully lonely just at first. You have heard, I suppose, of his daughter's death?'

Oh, yes. Valence told me. Such a happy release, was it not, dear Lady Lowater? I really felt quite glad when I heard about it. She has had such a long suffering time.'

'You have not been to see her, I think?' said my lady.

'No;' and Mrs. ANTHONY arranged a sweet little lace kerchief into a more effective knot on one shoulder. 'It is simply impossible for me to bear the sight of suffering. It unnerves me directly. But, ever since you told me about her, I have taken care that something should be sent two or three times a week. I believe she has never wanted for anything.'

'I believe not. And Valence has given her personal love and tenderness which are worth a thousand times more than anything that could be sent.'

This was said by Lady Lowater with

just a touch of sharpness. She knew, better than most people, how little gold can give, and how much that love is worth of which she had had so scant a portion in her miserable life. And she was a little scornful of the benevolence which could stop at sending puddings and half-crowns from a well-spread table and a well-filled purse.

Mrs. Antony had seen that look before on Lady Lowater's face, seen it a very long time ago, when she, as Libbie Dyson, had been scouring her pans one sunny summer afternoon in the mossy courtyard behind the kitchen, and my lady, coming past from the poultry-house, had caught sight of Sir Guy loitering about on pretence of attending to his guns. It was just before she went to her new situation at Crumbleby, and she had never seen it since. But she did not need to be afraid of it

now, as then. One naturally felt more independent, sitting in silks and laces by my lady's side on the croquet-lawn, than standing in homespun at a sink in the back-yard, looking after my lady's kitchen utensils. She ignored the look altogether, and gave all her attention to the adjustment of a rose amongst the lace, as she replied,

Ah, yes. Kindness is worth infinitely more than money. But, as Valence was giving all that was necessary, I thought I might perhaps only be intruding, so I left everything to her. But I assure you that Dyson and his daughter have been objects of the greatest solicitude to me ever since I came to the Elms.

And so indeed they had, though not quite in the sense which Lady Lowater was supposed to accept.

'I am the more sorry for them, her

ladyship continued, 'because they have relatives who are in a position to help them. Many years ago Dyson's other daughter married exceedingly well, quite above her own station. It is atrocious that she does not come forward now to their help.'

'Excessively ungrateful of her,' said Mrs. Antony, her fingers not trembling in the least as, the rose being satisfactorily adjusted in the folds of creamy lace, she brushed away a few leaves which had fallen upon her delicate fawn-coloured cashmere. 'I think nothing is so miserable as ingratitude. But perhaps she is dead.'

Mrs. Antony devoutly hoped that Lady Lowater would accept that explanation of the ingratitude.

'I do not know. Ben Dyson is quite of

opinion that she is living and prospering somewhere; but the subject pains him so that now I never mention it. I feel a little interest in it myself, because the woman once lived at the Court as scullery-maid. A clever girl and pretty, and quite awake to her own advantage; just the sort to make her way in life if she got a start. They have never heard of her death, so one may reasonably suppose that she is comfortably settled somewhere. I would ask some one to look into the matter, but that poor Dyson gets into such a fever if it is ever mentioned to him.

Here, to Mrs. Antony's great relief, the Murray-Mortimers, mother and daughter, came up; and though under other circumstances the relinquishing of the seat by Lady Lowater's side, in full view of guests on the croquet-lawn, would have been a

sacrifice, the solicitor's wife gave it up now with the best grace in the world, and very readily accompanied Miss Mortimer in a stroll to the larch plantation.

CHAPTER XIV.

BUT her anxieties were not yet at an end.

Lady Lowater's garden-parties were not so exclusive as the little afternoon-teas and other indoor social opportunities, to which only the upper ten of the neighbourhood received invitations. Indeed, as her ladyship herself used to remark to Miss Pentwistle, a garden-party was chiefly useful because everyone could be asked to it, and the guests were not bound to take any notice of each other afterwards. If Mrs. Petipase's grenadine, new for the occasion, found itself side by

side in the refreshment tent with the family lace and family pride of the Countess Muchmarsh, that was no need why either of the ladies should look conscious, when next day the doctor's little wife, sitting by her husband's side in a quite unheraldic gig, passed the almost royal-blooded head of the Royton family in her coroneted chariot, with a powdered coachman in front and a powdered footman behind, rolling along to deposit her cards at the county mansion of the Marchioness of Langlands, a mile beyond Byborough. And if Lady Belleray, a copious, majestic, condescending sort of woman, happened to make a remark to Mrs. Crudenay, wife of the curate of St. Luke's, Perry Point, as the two ladies met amongst the Lowater rose-beds, there was no necessity whatever, when they encountered each other a quarter of an hour later amongst the rank and

fashion of the croquet-lawn, for the curate's wife to slip quietly on one side, and so save Lady Belleray the awkwardness of a recognition. They just passed each other, that was all, and each understood that it was all right.

Such being the case, the words, 'and party,' were generally added to the cards of invitation for the Lowater Court garden-parties. And Mrs. Petipase of the Cove, and Mrs. Lupitt, wife of a retired officer, who lived there too, nearly always asked their friends to come and stay with them when these outdoor entertainments were going on, so that there was what might be called quite a fringe of middle-class respectability mingled with the titled and honourable of my lady's more immediate acquaintances. Mrs. Petipase, on this occasion, as soon as ever she received the card, wrote off to invite her friend Mrs. Cottam, from Hurches-

ter; and then, having an acquaintance in the west country to whom she was desirous of showing a little attention, she asked her too, both ladies arriving in time to be present at the second of the parties. The Murray-Mortimers, also, had friends, and so had the Dollingbrokes, and Miss Pentwistle was quite sure that if Mrs. Antony had any connections, who could with propriety have appeared on the occasion, she would have given them the opportunity of seeing Lowater Court. But no one came.

It was the afternoon of the second party. Miss Pentwistle had joined Mrs. Petipase and her two ladies, and was conducting them, along with Mrs. Mortimer, to the rock-seat, that being the first place to which strangers were taken. Lady Belle-ray had had her chestnut-trees topped so that, winter or summer, there was now

a fine view of the sea to be obtained.

'So kind of her, was it not, Mrs. Lupitt?' said Miss Pentwistle. 'You know Lady Lowater has so often wished those trees were down, and she has said as much over and over again, but Lady Belleray would never take the hint.'

'Until Sir Merrion came home,' put in Mrs. Mortimer, who was rather spiteful towards the Bellerays. 'It is interesting to see what can be done when there is a young baronet to be propitiated. It is to be hoped that the concession will have its expected results. It is Julia, I think, that Lady Belleray has laid out for Sir Merrion. Do you think there is anything in it? And how long is he going to stay at home?'

'Well, as to the staying at home,' Miss Pentwistle replied, 'Lady Lowater always says that depends upon circumstances.'

'Of course, the circumstances being whether he meets with a wife or not.'

Mrs. Petipase laughed.

'I should think there will be no difficulty in that. Sir Merriem is one of the pleasantest-looking young men I have ever seen, and everyone speaks well of him. I wonder he has not married before. I hope he will find a lady worthy of him.'

'Lady Belleray would be delighted with it for one of her girls,' said Mrs. Mortimer, carefully however, addressing her remark exclusively to Miss Pentwistle, as she was not on calling terms with the Petipases. The Murray-Mortimers were even more particular than Lady Lowater about their acquaintance, having yet a position to make good in the neighbourhood.

'There is some one else, who would be delighted with it for hers too,' replied Miss Pentwistle, with a meaning look in the

direction of Mrs. Antony, who in the most charming of garden-party toilettes, and with an air half of triumph, half of watchfulness, as of an angler who has hooked a fine salmon, but not landed him, was coming up from the fern-houses, in company with her daughter and Sir Merrión, the two Dollingbroke girls close behind, evidently of the party, though not favoured, like Miss Dormer, with the personal attentions of the young baronet.

Miss Mortimer followed Miss Pentwistle's glance.

‘Ridiculous! You don't mean to say that Mrs. Antony is thinking of anything of the sort. Why, Lady Lowater would not be content with less than an earl's daughter for that boy of hers, unless he married money, and rebuilt the Court, and that sort of thing. What can the woman be thinking of?’

'We shall see. At any rate, you cannot deny that Sir Merrion is very attentive.'

For, as they came out from the fern-houses, he turned aside to a shed where the gardener was re-potting some pelargoniums, and gathering a cluster of the finest, gave them to Miss Dormer, who accepted them without any signs of being overpowered by the condescension. Apparently it was not the first time she had been so honoured.

'Well, as you say, it *does* look rather marked. If he means anything, what a position it will be for a girl who has not a sixpence to bless herself with. And a very pleasant change for her, too, for they do say Mrs. Antony is a perfect tyrant in the house—won't let anybody be considered but herself.'

Miss Pentwistle shrugged her shoulders.

‘I saw that from the first. You need never expect anything else from those fluffy, fair-haired women, who have been married so many times. They know how to keep their husbands in subjection. If experience helps at all, Mrs. Antony has had enough of it.’

Here Mrs. Petipase ventured again into conversation, though timidly, the overshadowing Mrs. Murray-Mortimer being a little too much for her.

‘Miss Pentwistle, has Mrs. Antony ever visited at the Court?’

‘Oh! my dear Mrs. Petipase, it is impossible to say where Mrs. Antony has been, or what she has done. Has she told you anything of the sort?’

‘Yes, and so it comes with authority. You know at the last garden-party I was here, and Mrs. Crudenay and I and the vicar’s wife of Perry Point were stroll-

ing about with her, and we got into a lot of curious old places at the back of the Court, picturesque but dreadfully bewildering, and she gave me to understand she had seen them before.'

'When she was Mrs. Dormer, was it, or Mrs. Southwell, or Mrs. ——? No, there was not any further variety of married names, I think. Mrs. Petipase, *have* you ever been able to find out what was her name before she was married at all?'

'I have,' said Mrs. Mortimer. 'She told me in connection with a punch-ladle with an E. upon it, which I happened to admire as we were passing through the hall the first time I called there. She said her maiden name was Edison, which accounted for the E, you know, as the ladle was an old family piece.'

Mrs. Petipase and Miss Pentwistle looked at each other and smiled.

'I believe Mrs. Antony has several family pieces of that kind,' remarked Miss Pentwistle. 'One of them, I know, was bought in an old curiosity shop at Hurchester, and given to her for a wedding present. You can easily set up a pedigree if you live in a place where there are second-hand dealers. But tell us, Mrs. Petipase, about this previous visit to the Court.'

'Well, you know, this was how it came about. As I said before, we had got into this muddle amongst the mossy old gates and walls at the back of the Court, and when we none of us knew how to get out again, Mrs. Antony opened a door with a queer sort of latch, and led us right through. It was a latch nobody *could* have found out how to open. I never saw such a one in all my life, and when I made some remark about her seeming to know all

about it, she said she had once stayed at the Court, a long time ago, when she was almost a child. We got through as quickly as we could, because of being mixed up with the servants, you know, and then we came upon the Dollingbrokes, out on the side terrace, and nothing more was said about it.'

'A fabrication, Mrs. Petipase, nothing in the world but a fabrication. I believe Mrs. Antony enjoys bamboozling people in that manner, just for the sake of creating an interest about herself. She pretends to know things, and then when remarks are made about it, she has some wonderful story ready to account for everything. She did exactly the same with me once, only then it was to get herself admired as a *clairvoyante*.'

'A *clairvoyante*!' and little Mrs. Petipase bristled all over with delighted ani-

mation. 'Do tell me more about it. I am always wanting to be put into the mesmeric sleep myself, but Frank won't let me, because he says you never can tell how far it may go. I had an idea from the first that there was something peculiar about Mrs. Antony, a sort of unearthliness, you know, and mystery; and the clairvoyance accounts for it all. Do tell me everything about it.'

Miss Pentwistle allowed the doctor's little wife to get to the end of her enthusiasm, and then replied, with an evident satisfaction in what she was saying,

'Everything about it is just this, Mrs. Petipase: there is not a bit of truth in her story. It is like the Court visit, a make-up to get people interested in her. She is just one of those women who delight in mysteries, and, so long as we seem to believe her, there will always be a fresh

one ready for us. I think she understands now that I, at least, am sceptical.'

'You are, Miss Pentwistle, it is too bad of you. Of course one *had* to give up the Queen Anne inkstand, there was no help for it, but I should like to ask her all about the clairvoyance. It is so delightfully mysterious. I declare it makes me almost afraid of her.'

'Very well, here she comes. We will turn down this side walk and meet them. Now ask what questions you please, and we shall see what comes of it. I think my lady Antony has had quite enough of Sir Merrion for this afternoon, so we shall be doing no harm by separating them.'

CHAPTER XV.

BUT Mrs. Mortimer did not intend that the separation should be effected by leaving the young baronet to Miss Dormer's exclusive possession. Her own daughter was coming up just at the same time with Mrs. Pontifex, and, under the pretext of Miss Mortimer's great desire to make acquaintance with a new species of *adiantum*, Sir Merrion was sent off with the two ladies on a second visit to the fern-houses, leaving Valence and the Dollingbroke girls with the Pentwistle party.

Mrs. Mortimer kept Valence at her own side; the Dollingbrokes were a little in

advance. Mrs. Petipase, taking possession of Mrs. Antony, was full of eagerness on the clairvoyance question.

‘Do you know, you have made me quite afraid of you?’ she said. ‘I feel already as if you were going to find out all about me.’

Mrs. Antony, who had reason to fear that the finding out might be on the other side, tried to pass the whole thing off. It was a subject, she said, on which she much disliked being questioned. She did possess such a gift, she was sorry to say; but it excited her nervous system so that she was anxious, if possible, to forget all about it. Would Mrs. Petipase kindly not mention it again?

Valence looked annoyed, almost irritated. Mrs. Mortimer noticed it. It might be about this nonsensical clairvoyance, or it might be because Sir

Merrion had been taken away from her side and handed over to some one else.

‘For my own part, Miss Dormer, I believe it is entirely a mistake,’ she said, keeping Valence behind with her, whilst Mrs. Petipase made what she could of Mrs. Antony. ‘People may so easily deceive themselves about that sort of thing, fancying they have had visions, when it is nothing of the sort. I have not the slightest doubt that your mother came to visit at the Court, years ago, when she was Miss Edison.’

Valence did not look irritated now, only puzzled.

‘I did not know that mamma ever was Miss Edison,’ she replied, very simply.

‘And I did not know, either, that she had ever visited at the Court. I thought she was as much a stranger here as I am myself.’

‘Oh ! well, then, it is one of Mrs. Petipase’s fancies. She certainly has a remarkable talent for getting hold of the wrong end of a thing. But I do not think I am mistaken in my impression about your mother’s maiden name being—’

‘It was Dyson,’ said Valence.

‘My dear Miss Dormer, you are dreaming. Mrs. Antony told me herself it was Edison. It was when I was calling upon her, soon after her marriage. My attention was attracted by that quaint old punch-ladle in the hall, with an E. on the handle. Your mother said then it was an old family piece, and that the E was for Edison, her maiden name.’

• Valence was silent. She could understand. Elizabeth Dyson. Edison—it was near enough to be defended as only a prevarication ; but it made her feel bitterly ashamed.

'Well,' she said, quietly, 'I can only tell you what I have always thought to be the right name.'

'Oh! yes, yes,' Mrs. Mortimer replied, carelessly. 'The matter was not of much importance to her. I daresay there has been a misunderstanding somewhere. One cannot always be sure of having caught a word rightly. Edison is much prettier than Dyson; but that is of very little consequence, as Mrs. Antony dropped the name so long ago. What lovely geraniums those are in your belt—pelargoniums, I suppose. I ought to call them, only one likes the old-fashioned words the best. Where did you get them?'

'Sir Merrion gathered them for me.'

'You don't say so. You *are* favoured. I know the gardener is dreadfully particular about having them picked. I once had the audacity to ask him for some

when the girls were going to a dance, but I was told he could not cut them on any account. But you see what it is to have a friend at court. I must come to you next time we want geraniums.'

Mrs. Mortimer spoke the words jestingly, but there was an expression in her eyes, as she bent them upon Valence, which made the girl's face red with indignation; the more so, coming closely, as it did, upon words which had opened to her so painful a glimpse of Mrs. Antony's untruthfulness. She felt both angry and humiliated. Mrs. Mortimer thought it was confusion, and followed up her advantage by a second remark, intended to pierce more deeply than the first. If this young girl thought she was going to spring over all their heads, the sooner she discovered her mistake the better.

'You must enjoy your visit here very

much,' she said, 'after being cooped up in that hospital at Hurchester. I think nursing must be such a disagreeable way of earning one's living. And you will feel it worse than ever when you have to go back again.'

'I don't think so,' said Valence, who, with a desperate effort, had recovered her self-possession. 'I can generally manage to be content wherever I find myself, so long as I know that I am obliged to be there.'

'You are very fortunate, then. I wish we could all say as much for ourselves. For my own part, I should feel it a very painful contrast to go from this lovely place to a hospital ward. Do you see much of Sir Merrion?'

'I really do not know if you would call it much,' said Valence. She was beginning now to suspect Mrs. Mortimer's in-

tentions, and to feel amused rather than indignant. 'I go out with him most days for a walk amongst the plantations.'

'Indeed! Well, I should certainly call that much. And, I understand, he is teaching you to ride.'

'Yes. I find it very pleasant. I have not enjoyed anything so much for a long time.'

How coolly the girl takes everything, thought Mrs. Mortimer. One might almost imagine there was an understanding between them. Not that such a thing was in the least likely; but Miss Dormer might as well be put on her guard. Some girls were so easily led away by a little attention from an eligible young man, especially when he happened to be a baronet.

'I daresay you have not. It is just

as well, however, to be careful. You are aware, I suppose, that Sir Merrion has the reputation of being a flirt?

'Thank you. I neither know, nor is it of the slightest importance that I should be informed.'

Mrs. Murray-Mortimer only laughed.

'Oh! don't be offended. I only thought it might be a kindness to give you a caution, especially as Lady Lowater's hopes for her son are generally understood in the neighbourhood. Have you met the countess's niece?'

Exactly the same question that Miss Pentwistle had asked a few weeks before. Valence closed the conversation by a reply which rather took Mrs. Mortimer by surprise.

I have not seen her, but I hear she is very pleasant. I think I must go to

Sir Merrion now. We are on the same side for croquet. He is coming up to remind me.'

And, with a look which Mrs. Mortimer could not quite understand, Valence took her departure, Sir Merrion, who had dropped his other lady companions, appropriating her in a manner almost sufficiently marked for an understanding. And Lady Lowater, chatting amongst the guests on the croquet-lawn, in full view of the whole proceeding. Mrs. Mortimer was almost as much puzzled as Miss Pentwistle.

'Curious, is it not?' she said to that lady, who was just a little in advance with Mrs. Petipase. 'But I have given her a caution. I always think that is the kindest thing you can do for a young girl who is getting her head turned by too much attention. A trying position, you know, to be a guest in the house under the cir-

circumstances. I told her he was a flirt—everybody knows that—so, if she encourages him, she must take the consequences. And what *do* you think, Miss Pentwistle? Mrs. Antony never has visited at the Court, and her name was not Edison before she was married. Miss Dormer herself told me so.'

'My dear Mrs. Mortimer, you need not be surprised at anything you hear about Mrs. Antony. As I told you before, she will say anything for the sake of effect. But, as you have found out what her name was not, have you found out what it was?'

'Yes, I have. It was Dyson.'

'Dyson! We have come to it at last. Dear me, the same name as the old woodman at the cottage. Do you know, Mrs. Mortimer——'

And Miss Pentwistle's face became as

sharp as that of a cat when she hears a mouse behind the wainscot.

‘Do you know, old Dyson had a daughter who married very much above her position five and twenty years ago, and has never been heard of since. Would it not be remarkable, now, if——’

Mrs. Mortimer and Mrs. Petipase simultaneously discarded in words the possibility of such a *fiasco*, but their countenances expressed an interest as eager, if not so keen, as that of Miss Pentwistle. Mrs. Mortimer spoke.

‘Impossible, my dear Miss Pentwistle. Pray do not, for the sake of all our feelings, mention anything of the sort. Why, poor dear Lady Lowater would positively die of vexation. Fancy us all driving up in our carriages and leaving our cards for the woodcutter’s daughter.’

‘A great deal worse than that, my dear

Mrs. Mortimer. You have not heard the half of it yet. This same woodcutter's daughter lived at the Court as scullery-maid, and was sent away because old Sir Guy—he was a dreadful old reprobate, you know—used to pay too much attention to her. Only fancy!

‘Oh! well, then, in that case, we must dismiss the affair entirely from our minds. It would simply be too dreadful. Please don't go on, Miss Pentwistle. I feel already as if I required a restorative.’

But at the same time the faces both of Mrs. Mortimer and the doctor's inquisitive little wife said more plainly than words could speak, ‘*Do go on.*’ And Miss Pentwistle went on, as if she were discussing a probability which was not of so very much importance, after all.

‘Well, you see, that would account for her being so well acquainted with the ar-

rangements of the courtyards at the back of the house. I shall propose that, at Lady Lowater's next garden-party, we contrive to penetrate into the scullery itself, and get lost there, and then see if Mrs. Antony's excellent memory can come to our aid. Not clairvoyance, you know, at all.'

'Oh, dear, dear! If it should *only* be an excellent memory, how foolish we should all look! But don't let us joke any more. It is too unpleasant a subject. Mrs. Antony really has the air of a lady.'

And Mrs. Mortimer glanced towards the solicitor's wife, who was chatting with one of the Belleray girls on the croquet-lawn. Sir Merrion was there too, trifling with Miss Dormer, until their turn came to play.

'She really *has* the air of a lady.'

'Just as an electro-plate spoon has the

air of a silver one,' remarked Miss Pentwistle.

'Ah! but I always say electro-plate shows the metal underneath.'

'Not unless you give it a good deep scratch, Mrs. Mortimer.'

'Well, then, I wonder how we could manage to get the scratch made. You have roused my curiosity to such an extent that, humiliating as the subject is, I shall never be content until we have got to the bottom of it.'

'Leave that to me,' said Miss Pentwistle. 'If there has been any deception, I will undertake to find it out.'

CHAPTER XVI.

THE guests dispersed. The servants were busy on the lawn removing the little tables, clearing away ices, strawberries, and claret-cup. Lady Lowater had gone to her own room to rest, glad that the whole thing was over. Valence would have gone to hers, too, but that Miss Pentwistle contrived to draw her aside and keep her walking up and down for half an hour in one of the retired shrubbery paths, telling her what Mrs. Mortimer and Mrs. Petipase had been saying.

Not telling her in a malicious way, and not placing things together in such a

manner as to give Valence even the remotest hint of the suspicion which she was cherishing in her own mind. She only repeated what had been said for the sake of drawing out some fresh information, if possible; Miss Dormer being a sensible, straightforward girl who never made mysteries about anything. If Mrs. Antony told one story and her daughter another, the daughter's would most probably be the correct version. Miss Pentwistle had found that out long ago.

This time the versions did not agree at all. So far as Valence knew, her mother had never been to Lowater Court before, had never had any family connections who could claim the letter E as their initial, Mrs. Antony's name, prior to her first marriage, being Dyson. And when Miss Pentwistle mentioned the old-fashioned ladle which had taken Mrs. Morti-

mer's fancy—not, however, adding its legendary history—Valence informed her, in the most matter-of-fact manner, that it had been bought, with some other silver, at a sale in one of the houses in the Minister Close at Hurehester.

That was all Miss Pentwistle wanted to know for the present. She was not going to make an enemy of Miss Donner by dropping hints before the time; still less would she damage her own plans by enabling other people to be on their guard against them. She had made up her mind to get to the bottom of this business, but she must keep it to herself a little longer.

Still she had said enough, and Valence had heard enough from Mrs. Mortimer to give her a vague feeling of distrust and discomfort. When at last she was able to go into her own little room and think

quietly over all that had passed, there came into her mind a more dreary sense of separation between herself and her mother than she had ever experienced before. Looking out from her window to that path which led from the fern houses to the croquet lawn, the little path bordered with lilies and roses whose sweetness now would always be mingled with the bitterness of Mrs. Mortimer's words, she could but lean her head upon her hands and weep for very loneliness of heart.

Not for anything Mrs. Mortimer had said about Sir Merrion. That, galling as it might be, was only a scratch upon the surface. There was no self-consciousness in her own heart to give poison to it. She could feel pity for a life so empty of real interest that it must needs busy itself with gossip and insinuation. Still neither one

nor the other reached herself. The woman had been vulgar, meddling, impertinent, but she had inflicted no mortal wound, except upon her own dignity.

Not so with those other words which she had spoken, and which had not been spoken in malice at all. Those words had opened for Valence Dormer a new light upon her mother's character. It was looking into that character now, seeing the petty shifts of which it was capable for an end so paltry as the mere keeping up of appearances, which made the girl hide her face for very shame.

Valence Dormer and her mother were strangers, as mother and daughter often are, from mere force of circumstances. Born in a foreign land, whose memories had faded for her now to a dim vision of dark-faced, turbaned servants, and shaded verandahs where green parrots screamed

and bright-eyed lizards darted to and fro amongst the blossoming creepers, she had been early sent away from her parents, and had seen them no more until she was a girl just stepping into womanhood—a girl who had found out what work there was for her to do, and who came home with a brave determination to be no burden but a help to the father whose life was slowly wasting away.

He died before she had learned to love him with other than the love of filial duty. She remembered him now as a quiet, ailing, subdued man, asking little for himself, not murmuring much that death was coming to him before its time. She did all for him that she could, nursed him to his end faithfully and affectionately, felt a strange blank, both in heart and life, when he was gone; but his relation to her had been that of the weaker

who leans upon the stranger. Disease had dealt too hardly with him for a real mental companionship to grow up between him and the young daughter who ministered to his weary days and nights of suffering. He died a stranger to her, save for the love which grows of tenderness and pity. All that Valence Dormer could really know of her father must come to her when they met elsewhere than here.

Then followed for a few months a very quiet life in the little house at Hurchester. But only for a few months. Valence soon found that seclusion was not what her mother desired. The wine of life had by no means lost its sparkle for the graceful, fascinating woman who took such pains to have her widow's weeds of the latest fashion. Not seclusion, but a third husband was her intention; and, for the better carrying out of that intention, it was

advisable that the daughter should marry too.

Unfortunately, Valence was not what her mother denominated a marrying girl. There was too little of the traditional ivy type about her—flinging out its feelers in all directions, in hope of finding a traditional oak to clasp and cling to. Not that the oaks were wanting. Even in Hurchester, scantily as it was supplied with timber of that description, more than one young sapling had offered his arm for the support of the feminine ivy, but the feelers were not forthcoming. As the widowed Mrs. Dormer said, whose clasping tendrils only sprouted forth more luxuriantly the oftener they were torn away by the removal of their previous support, Valence showed far too much self-dependence. She let men see that she was enough for herself; that she could do

without them. She did not display enough of that feminine weakness which is so irresistible to men of a certain class, because it demands nothing from them but physical strength. Claspings and clinging were not in Miss Dormer's line. She was more like the lily plant, which folds its own leaves closely round all of beauty within; which gives not a hint of colour or sweetness until the coronal of queenly blossom is ready to spring forth to the sunlight. And then it asks neither prop nor shelter, only leave to shed forth its perfume as it will.

Finding that Valence was not minded to marry for convenience, and so leave the field clear for her own achievements, Mrs. Dormer was more than willing when her daughter proposed to join the staff of indoor nurses at the Hurchester hospital. It was a genteel way of earning

a living. It relieved the housekeeping. It added a little importance to the family position, especially when one of the patients chanced to be a young baronet, who left his card, and was disposed to be friendly afterwards; and it enabled her to follow out more systematically her own aim—the securing of a third husband.

Valence disposed of, she soon accomplished that. Mr. Antony came upon the scene, saw, and was conquered. Once more Mrs. Dorner was happy in having something to cling to; and having seen to it that her settlements were safe, and her future, if this third prop were removed, securely provided for, she once more commenced her career as a fashionable woman; Valence just coming for a few weeks to help her through the wedding festivities, and then to be sent back to the life she had chosen at Hurchester.

Such was the girl's experience of motherhood; such the tending, training, holy influence which had been spent upon her. It was meagre enough—starving in all that could feed affection or reverence—but, as yet, Valence had never made acquaintance with actual deceit or falsehood in her mother's character. It was shallow, weak, frivolous, entirely dependent on outward circumstances; bare of everything that could bind and strengthen sweet home-life, only it was not repulsive. If she could not look up to her mother as to a Madonna on the altar of her heart, at least she might be a pleasant companion for such chance hours of domestic intercourse as seemed likely ever to be necessary.

Now a fresh element had come into the relations between them. Hitherto she had known her mother as a clever woman

of the world, anxious to get as much enjoyment out of life as possible, careful to keep up an appearance, eager for all the little attentions and compliments which a pretty face and a fascinating manner can generally command, but nothing more than that. As for dissimulation, double-dealing, actual telling of untruths to keep up a better position amongst the people around her, such a thought had never entered into her mind in connection with one between whom and herself, though there had never been harmony, there had still never been discord.

Until now. Valence Dormer stood at the window of her little room in Lowater Court, thinking, thinking, until her head throbbed and her brain was weary, and a feeling of desolation she had never known in all her life before swept over her. But

she must say nothing yet. It seemed to her, as she stood looking out on the wide-reaching beauty of lawn and woodland, that she had no right to be a guest in that home at all, that she was taking what would not have been given her had the truth been spoken. She would know that truth, cost what it might. And then, if things were not what they seemed, she would go back to her old life and be at peace.

CHAPTER XVII.

SHE determined to go to the Elms first thing next morning, and ask her mother a few plain questions.

When Valence had a thing to do, she generally did it in the most direct way. Her manner of going through the pew-door was typical of most other proceedings; straight to the point she wished to reach, and no delay upon the road. Accordingly, she started as soon as breakfast was over, Lady Lowater remaining in her own room to rest after the fatigues of the previous day, and Miss Pentwistle being busy with her accounts.

But there was to be delay this time, though not of her own making. Sir Merriion overtook her as she was turning into the bit of plantation which led to Ben Dyson's cottage.

He had his gun over his shoulder and his pouch at his side, and his usual following of dogs leaping and barking, and in various other ways testifying their delight at having an outing with their master. Valence heard them, and knew who was with them, but she would not look back. Rather she hurried her pace, that she might reach the stile and take refuge, if need be, in Ben Dyson's cottage, before the young man could come within speech of her.

But he was not to be baffled. With a few strides that fell silently enough upon the soft turf, he was at her side, and laid his gun upon her shoulder.

‘It isn’t loaded; you need not be afraid,’ he said, as she turned with just a heightened colour upon her cheek, and he lifted his cap and brushed away the close curling light hair from his forehead. A fine, handsome young fellow, truly, as any girl need wish to step by her side all through life, if it was only handsomeness she wanted.

‘I am not frightened,’ Valence replied, and, with just a slight movement of her shoulder, she let the gun slide down from it. ‘I know you would not have touched me with it if it had been loaded.’

‘Jove! no, I should think not. I am not such a fool as that. But I did want to make you start, if only you hadn’t been so awfully sensible. Now, any of those Belleray girls would have shrieked like mad if I had brought a gun within a dozen yards of them. What fools girls

are! I wonder if they really do think a gun is alive, or whether it's only just because they want smoothing and stroking down. Now, you wouldn't have screamed unless you had been really frightened, and I should like to frighten you just for once. Where are you going?'

'Up to the Elms.'

'You might have told me, and I would have gone with you. And you promised me you would some day let me give you a row on the lily-pond. Come along now. You see mother is resting, so she doesn't want either of us for company.'

'No, thank you. I must go on. Besides, you have your shooting to do.'

'Bother the shooting! I can do it any time. Greely and Stokes said they wanted a few of the rooks putting out of the way, but another day's grace won't do them any harm. The lily-pond will be just

lovely this morning. I haven't had it out with you yet for going off as you did with Mrs. Mortimer yesterday. What made you in such a hurry to get rid of me? I believe you don't half know how I like to have a talk with you.'

There was a tone half pleading, half bantering, in his voice. It was on the borderland of love. But it was not the tone that brought the colour in a deeper rose to Valence Dormer's face. It was the mention of Mrs. Mortimer, recalling, as it did, all that Mrs. Mortimer had said to her. But Sir Merrion drew his own conclusions, and his pulses began to beat a little faster, and he determined to make an end of it this time.

'Now I say, Miss Dormer, don't keep going on towards that stile. If it's anything you want at the Elms, I'm sure it can wait until this afternoon. Come along

with me to the lily-pond. I can leave my gun and things in the boat-shed, and the dogs will take care of themselves until we come back. Crip is as good as a keeper any day.'

Still Valence's steps went steadily on in the direction of the stile, and the colour as steadily deepened in her face.

The young man playfully held his gun across the path just before her. They were not fifty yards from Ben's cottage now.

'There, you can't get past that unless I choose to let you. Now do be sensible, and let us have a nice morning together.'

'You said just now I was too sensible,' replied Valence, with a touch of her usual sauciness, and she looked at him for a moment, but looked down again quickly. There was something in his face which told her she had better take refuge in the

cottage. It was the look which asks for love, and, though all the Lowater lands were his, she had none to give him. She took hold of the stock of his gun to turn it aside.

‘No, you shan’t!’ he said. ‘You’re always trying to get away from me. Valence, I say, don’t be stupid. You might know what I mean well enough. Jove! I’m sure I’ve been doing all I could to get you to understand, and the more I do the more you won’t see.’

‘Sir Merrion,’ and Valence’s eyes flashed, ‘you ought not. Lady Lowater would not——’

‘Lady Lowater would not what? Lady Lowater cares for you as much as I do. No, bother it, I don’t mean that, but I mean she’d be as pleased as could be if you would care for me as much as I care for you. Ask her, if you can’t believe me.’

She thinks there isn't another girl like you in the world, and so do I. Just you let that gun alone. Your arms are not as strong as mine. If I don't choose you to move it, you shan't move it, until——'

Just at this moment a dainty rose-lined parasol was seen skimming along the other side of the hedge, beyond the cottage.

'There is mamma,' said Valence. 'I must go to her.'

Merrion drew back his gun. A rueful look came over his face. He whistled up his dogs from amongst the brush-wood.

'Hang Mrs. Antony! I wish she'd been a hundred miles away. But you've got to hear it, Valence.'

And raising his cap to the elder lady, and with a comically pitiful glance to

wards the younger one, he shouldered his gun again and dived into the depths of the plantation.

'You little mischief!' he said to himself, as Valence sprang over the stile. 'And you think you've escaped me for this time. But I'll make you listen by-and-by.'

For the thought that Valence Dormer could not want to hear, never entered his mind.

CHAPTER XVIII.

‘It was such a thousand pities to have sent him away, Valence dear,’ said Mrs. Antony, when the young girl had explained to her how Sir Merriam had wished her to go to the lily-pond with him, and she had declined on account of wanting her morning for other business. ‘It would have been so very delightful for you, and really I think anything you wanted to say to me could have been said at another time.’

For Mrs. Antony’s hopes respecting Sir Merriam’s intentions were steadily rising now, though she was too politic to make

them the subject of conversation. What she had noticed at the garden-party the day before, had inspired her with almost confidence that Valence might, if she chose, become Lady Lowater. It all depended upon herself. If she would but show a little more of that pretty consciousness which a man naturally likes to see in anyone upon whom he has fixed his preference. If she would but be a trifle coquettish, lead him on, in fact, for that was all he wanted, Mrs. Antony was convinced in her own mind the offer would be made before a week had elapsed. And therefore she was deeply concerned that Valence had let this opportunity pass. She believed, for she had very sharp eyes where young men and maidens were concerned, that Sir Merriem was on the point of declaring himself, when her pink parol, seen in the distance, gave an unexpected turn to events.

'My dear girl, it was such a pity. You might have come to me any other time. It is never well to appear unmindful of kindness.'

'No, mamma, I could not have come any other time. I wanted very much to ask you about something.'

Quite a new light brightened Mrs. Antony's face. Had the young man really been saying anything? Was that the ending and not the beginning of a declaration? She laid her hand with an air of confidence upon Valence's arm, and said, as though already admitting her amongst the number of those who have achieved the goal of their efforts,

'My dear child, you may trust me. I have been expecting it for some time. Sir Merrion has given you to understand his intentions.'

Valence's face flushed.

'It is not Sir Merrion's intentions,' she said, 'that I wanted to talk to you about. We will let them alone.'

'Quite right, my dear,' replied Mrs. Antony, still with great satisfaction, for Valence's manner convinced her that something of the nature of an offer had been made. 'I do not want to force your confidence in the least. I am sure you will do everything that is right. Only you have seen so little of the world that I wish you to look well where you are treading.'

'I know much more of it now than I did yesterday, mamma.'

'No doubt, Valence. A great amount of experience may be crowded into a single day. Only there is one thing I should wish to say to you. I do not think there is the slightest necessity for you to hesitate on Lady Lowater's account. I

have reason to believe that she would be perfectly agreeable, and so I feel it my duty to mention it to you. Lady Lowater's regard for you is almost motherly.

'It is nothing about Lady Lowater,' Valence replied, wearily. 'I only wanted to tell you something which the people were saying yesterday. Mamma, *did* you ever stay at Lowater Court?'

Mrs. Antony's expression changed. The interest died out of her face. She removed her hand from its resting-place on Valence's arm, and replied, with the air of an injured woman,

'My dear, who ever put such a ridiculous idea into your head? What questions you ask. Who has been mentioning anything of the kind to you? Not Lady Lowater?'

'Oh, dear no, mamma. Lady Lowater has never asked me any questions at all.

It was Miss Pentwistle who told me yesterday, after the garden-party, what some of the people had been saying to her. It was a long story about Mrs. Petipase. Mrs. Petipase said she was with you and some other people at the first party, and you got lost amongst some out-of-the-way places at the back of the house, and you seemed to know the way, and opened a gate that had a very curious latch. And, when some remark was made about your being able to manage it, you said you had been staying at the Court some time ago.'

Mrs. Antony looked annoyed, nothing more than that, for her own common-sense told her it would be wise not to attach too much importance to these inconvenient inquiries.

'Really, my dear Valence, this inquisitiveness on the part of the people about here is very boring. One might think I

was a princess in disguise, so much curiosity is manifested about me. It is flattering, to be sure, but at the same time a great nuisance. I am not aware that I ever said anything to Mrs. Petipase about a previous visit to the Court; though, now you mention it, I do seem to have a dim recollection of something of the sort.'

'Of a visit to the Court, mamma, or of Mrs. Petipase having asked you?'

Valence was too much like an examining counsel. Mrs. Antony replied, impatiently,

'Whichever you like, my dear. It is a matter of no consequence. I wish Mrs. Petipase would find something else to interest herself about than the affairs of a quiet person like myself. Her gossiping propensities must be checked.'

'I don't know that she was gossiping, mamma. She was just saying to Miss

Pentwistle that it was strange you should know so much about the Court, if you had never been there before. And then Miss Pentwistle explained it in another way; for she said you attributed it to clairvoyance. And she began again with that old story about the rock-seat—about your knowing the way to it, you remember, and saying how the chestnuts had grown.'

Mrs. Antony began to think clairvoyance would be the best way out of the difficulty. She wished she had kept to it all along.

'Valence, I don't like to talk about it. These things are very mysterious. If I dwelt upon them too much, I should become almost afraid of myself. I do have the most remarkable impressions. In fact, as regards my own life, I scarcely know what is real, and what is vision-

ary. You must not question me. It is painful.'

'All right, mamma. I am sure I don't want to hear anything about clairvoyance. It always seems to me more comfortable to keep to things that you can understand. But Mrs. Mortimer was talking to me yesterday about something else. I think she is a much more inquisitive woman than Mrs. Petipase. She was asking, or at any rate wanting to find out, what was your name before you were married, and she said you had told her it was Edison.'

'Then, Valence, if I told her so, why need she ask you again?'

'I really don't know, mamma; but, at any rate, I told her she was mistaken, because your name was not Edison, but Dyson.'

'Then, Valence, I must say you did

rather an impertinent thing. When you found that Mrs. Mortimer had received her impressions from me, you should have allowed her to retain them.'

'What! even when they were wrong, mamma?'

'Valence, it is a matter that you have nothing whatever to do with. As you know, my name was Elizabeth Dyson; and if I chose to take the first letter of the Christian name, and add it to the surname, and so make the whole more distinctive, that is my affair, not yours. It is a matter in which there was not the slightest necessity for you to interfere.'

'I did not interfere, mamma,' said Valence, with a horrible sense of humiliation, as this bit of deceit clearly certified itself.

I only thought she was mistaken, and I told her so. And then she began about that punch-ladle in the hall, and said she

understood from you that it was an old family piece, with the initial E, for Edison, upon it. And I did feel so uncomfortable.'

'And pray, did you feel it necessary to make any explanations about that, may I ask?' replied Mrs. Antony, with dignity.

'No, mamma. I began to feel there was something in the whole affair which I could not understand, and so I was quiet. I thought I had better ask you about it before I said any more.'

Mrs. Antony relaxed. It was better not to place oneself in open antagonism with such inconveniently straightforward people. Questions were evidently being asked. The utmost tact and prudence would be needed to prevent bygone events from being uprooted. Indeed, probably they would be, sooner or later. But if things could remain as they were until Valence's prospects, so very promising now, were

realised, then any awkward exposures would be of comparatively little importance. The marriage once accomplished, people might find out what they liked. As for herself, she was safe. Nothing could now prevent her from being Mrs. Antony, if not of the Elms, then of somewhere else. Valence must be kept in the dark a little longer, but at the same time she must be instructed to use more discretion for the future.

‘My child,’ she said, with an air of kindly consideration, mingled with justifiable severity upon other people’s inquisitiveness, ‘you did quite right to stop the conversation. Mrs. Mortimer was excessively impertinent. I must say I am surprised that a woman in her position should know so little of the usages of society. As you must have seen for yourself, Valence, it was rather annoying when we came here

to find that people in such a very humble position as the woodman and his daughter were bearing my maiden name; and so I felt myself quite justified in making the slight alteration which seems to have puzzled you so much. You have not been sufficiently in the world to understand all these little matters, but I can assure you that it is a customary thing for people to alter a name temporarily, when the using of it becomes inconvenient. If the matter should be mentioned again, do not take any notice.

‘And about the punch-ladle, mamma?’

‘My dear, I cannot enter into that question. I really am not responsible for Mrs. Mortimer’s misrepresentations. I should advise you to keep clear of the woman for the future.’

‘And am I to keep clear of Mrs. Petipase and Miss Pentwistle, too? They are very

fond of asking questions. Miss Pentwistle wished to know once what part of the country you came from. I was obliged to say I did not know. Where did grand-papa live, mamma?

Mrs. Antony again looked bored, as if the whole thing were of so little importance it was simply a waste of time to go into it minutely.

'Somewhere about in the south, Valence. I believe it was a sweetly pretty place in the country. I have told you as much as that a hundred times before, and the only reason I have not told you more is that my own family disapproved of my marriage, and therefore I had no intercourse with them after it. Let that suffice.'

'Very well. And shall I say so when people ask me?'

Certainly. You need say nothing else.

It was the marriage with Mr. South-

well, then, which grandpapa did not approve?’

‘Yes.’

‘But there was nothing in my father which could make anyone wish you not to marry him.’

Valence said this with a pride which had certainly not come to her through her mother.

‘Your father was an officer and a gentleman,’ said Mrs. Antony. ‘Let that suffice. You are very much like him in every respect. Poor, dear man, we spent many happy years together.’

And Mrs. Antony felt in her pocket for her handkerchief. The tears, however, dried before they fell.

‘But these things are so far past now,’ she continued, giving her eyes a gentle little touch for appearance’ sake before putting the handkerchief back again, ‘that

they have become for me in the light of my present life almost as if they never existed. Dwelling upon the past is a very unprofitable occupation.'

'Then let us make some arrangements for the future, mamma. There is no need for me to stay any longer with Lady Lowater now.'

'No need, my dear?' and Mrs. Antony's watchful, wide-awake expression returned, the expression with which those who saw much of her were so familiar. 'There is every need, if Lady Lowater wishes it.'

'No, mamma; there is nothing for me to do. I did promise Ben Dyson I would take care of him as long as I could; but Mr. Rock is very good to him, and, now that Margaret is dead, I feel that my reason for staying at the Court is gone.'

'My dear Valence, so long as there is duty for you to do by the bedside of the

sick and suffering, you can never say that the reason is gone.'

'Well, then, if you like, I will come back to the Elms, and go to Ben Dyson every day from there, as long as you wish it.'

But that was not at all the same thing, and Mrs. Antony hastened to put matters on a right foundation.

'My dear, I consider that Lady Lowater's claims upon you are binding, so long as poor Dyson is in his present condition. The family have served her faithfully and well, and it is quite right she should feel her obligation to relieve their necessities as far as possible. You can help her to do that, none so effectually, and you ought to feel it your duty to stay.'

'I have no reason to believe that Lady Lowater wishes me to stay, mamma, now

that Margaret is gone. And I have no wish to stay. I should be happier at my work in Hurchester.'

Mrs. Antony sighed. Was ever any girl so unpractical? And with a marriageable baronet on the very point of declaring himself.

'Valence, I have reason to believe that Lady Lowater does wish it. And, under present circumstances, it would be in the highest degree unadvisable for you to go away. I am sure you must know my meaning.'

'Yes, mamma.

And Valence Dormer did not droop her head; she only carried it a little higher. And at the same time she fell a step or two apart from this clever, fashionable woman of the world, whose character was developing itself in a new light. They walked on for awhile in silence, Valence

thinking her own thoughts. Then Mrs. Antony began.

‘For how long did Lady Lowater ask you?’

‘No time was fixed. It was to depend upon circumstances.’

‘Exactly. No doubt Lady Lowater thought the poor girl would linger on much longer. It was a happy release for her, but I shall be very sorry if it shortens your visit. Sir Merriem stays for some weeks yet, I think.’

‘I am sure I don’t know,’ said Valence, just a little stiffly. And she said no more.

Mrs. Antony felt that she must act cautiously. Had the young man been saying anything? And had Valence, with her foolish notions of independence, put him off? If so, no good could be done by fault-finding. And to force her confidence about it would spoil everything.

The wisest plan was to appear ignorant of all else but Lady Lowater's quite certain desire that the young lady should remain with her. That desire could very safely be urged, insisted upon.

‘Well, Valence, my dear,’ she said, in an encouraging manner, ‘I think you may be left to your own judgment. Do whatever you think is your duty. Only do nothing rashly. My own opinion is that you would be acting very ungratefully by Lady Lowater if you left her, whilst by remaining you could in the least degree fulfil her wishes with respect to poor Dyson. Lady Lowater, from my point of view, is the first person you have to consider. Her very great kindness has laid you under obligations which you can never repay. But, if you think that your work is done, by all means go. At the same time, I think you cannot

err if you allow yourself to be guided by Lady Lowater's own wishes in the matter.'

And there Mrs. Antony let the conversation drop, for she did not want it to go back to the question of antecedents.

CHAPTER XIX.

MEANWHILE, Miss Pentwistle, having satisfactorily balanced her accounts, was pursuing duty in the shape of a round of visits amongst the poor. On her way she met Mr. Rock, who came across the road with great alacrity. With much more, indeed, than Miss Pentwistle liked to see. For she was very much afraid he had it in his thoughts to prosecute that theological conversation, and recent events had so entirely occupied her attention that the 'heads' which she intended noting down for his benefit were still floating about in a most undeveloped state amongst

various other matters of a quite unspiritual kind. And until Sir Merrion's affairs were settled, and Miss Dormer's too, she felt that she could not meet Mr. Rock, still less attack him again on the subject of eternal realities. Those connected with her own immediate position as Lady Lowater's companion were, for the present, more important. But the curate was not bent upon a theological discussion this time.

'Miss Pentwistle,' he said, cheerily, 'I think you are the very person who can help me.'

'And I am sure I will, Mr. Rock,' she replied, much relieved, 'if it is any parish difficulty which requires my assistance.'

'Well then, it is a parish difficulty. You know Mr. Antony is one of the poor-law guardians, and he is very sore about poor old Dyson getting that five shillings a week of out-door relief. You know the

old man has a daughter married somewhere, who is in a position to help him, and Mr. Antony says the time has come when she should be looked up, and made to do her duty.'

'I am quite of Mr. Antony's opinion, Mr. Rock,' said Miss Pentwistle. 'It is very unjust to the parish if public money is taken to support a man whose own relatives can do it themselves.'

But, at the same time, Miss Pentwistle thought how very awkward it *might* be if those relatives were made to come forward. - Possibly it was only fancy, but she had a curious feeling that the solicitor's own wife was mixed up in the matter. The more she thought about it, the more likely it seemed to be.

'Well, I have just been to see old Dyson, and the poor man is in a great state about it. He has a tremendously bitter

feeling against his daughter—which I don't wonder at, considering that she has let her mother and sister drop off one after another into their graves, and never offered to do anything for them. He says he had rather die than take a penny from her; and yet Mr. Antony has made up his mind that, at the very next meeting of the guardians, the five shillings a week shall be stopped, that is, unless we can prove that the daughter is dead.'

Miss Pentwistle rather thought they would have a difficulty in proving that, but she did not say so.

'I almost wish, for the old man's sake,' Mr. Rock continued, 'that she was dead. It would smooth matters so for him. One had better have a dead daughter than a dishonourable one. I tell him so sometimes, when he gets into his tantrums about her, but he will have it that she is

alive and prospering somewhere. And Mr. Antony says, dead or alive, he will have the matter settled once for all. He cannot bear this frightful expenditure of public money. I tell him it is a pity he is not Chancellor of the Exchequer, and we should soon have a penny off the income tax.'

'He is quite right, Mr. Rock,' said Miss Pentwistle, with decision—'quite right. A man who allows public funds, whether national or parochial, to be misapplied is incurring a grave responsibility. Mr. Antony must do his duty.'

'Of course he must. Looked at from his own point of view, it is an exceedingly righteous thing to do; but, looked at from old Dyson's, it is very distressing. I am going now to Lady Lowater to see if anything can be done for him.'

'I do not think we ought to stop

the inquiry,' said Miss Pentwistle.

'I am afraid we can't if we would. The only thing is to do it as quietly and kindly as we can, so as not to hurt the old man's feelings. One doesn't like the police to be put on about it.'

'Oh, dear, no, not the police; that would be so very disagreeable. Did not the girl once live with Lady Lowater?'

'Yes, and that is one of the points I have to inquire about. You see, if Margaret had been living, we could have got information from her, but the poor man mixes things up so, and gets so excited that there is no doing anything with him. Perhaps Lady Lowater can tell us where she went after she left the Court.'

'I can tell you that myself. I used to hear Lady Lowater speak about it sometimes, when first I came here. She went to live at a place called Crumbleby, over a

hundred miles away, to be general servant to some respectable people there.'

'And you know some people near Crumbleby, do you not?'

'Yes, the Miss Paskerleys, a mile or two off. I am sure they would be very glad to make any inquiries for me.'

'Well, I know as much as this, that old Dyson's daughter Elizabeth was married at Crumbleby church, and, as the clergyman has been there for more than thirty years, he will remember about it. If your friends can trace her from there, and find out what became of her, we shall be all right. For my own part, I hope she is dead.'

'I don't think she is, Mr. Rock. She was a very clever, contriving, managing sort of girl, quite capable, from what Lady Lowater says, of looking after herself, and people of that sort generally keep them-

selves above-ground. It is the self-sacrificing ones that come to premature graves. Take my word for it, Libbie, as they used to call her, is much better off at this moment than either you or I. But you may depend upon me to do everything that lies in my power. I am quite as indignant as ever Mr. Antony can be at the waste of five shillings a week over a case that ought to be supported in the family.'

And Miss Pentwistle walked on, for Mr. Rock seemed to have come to the end of what he had to say.

But she smiled to herself as she thought over the whole matter. How curious that she, of all other people, should have been fixed upon to inquire into it. And how more than curious if her suspicions should prove to be correct.

'Stay, Mr. Rock,' she said, hurrying

after him a little way, for another idea had struck her. 'Can you remember what this—this Libbie Dyson's husband's name was? You see it would be convenient to have that at least to go upon.'

'The husband's name? Oh! dear, let me see, I'm sure Margaret told me it once. Sutherland? No, that was not it, but something like it. Suthell. Yes, Suthell, that was it.'

'Suthell. You don't know how it was spelt, do you?'

'No, I don't, and I shouldn't like to venture upon it with only Margaret's saying. It strikes me that perhaps Southwell may be the proper pronunciation of it, but I never saw it written, and so I cannot be sure. Anyhow you can say Suthell, and then if that doesn't do, you might try Southwell.'

Which most probably will do, thought Miss Pentwistle to herself, as once more she bade Mr. Rock good-morning and went upon her way.

CHAPTER XX.

THE threads of evidence began to knit themselves together in a very satisfactory manner. Miss Pentwistle had got hold of two names which pointed in the right direction. Suthell. Yes, that was no doubt the rustic manner of pronouncing Southwell; village people having a dislike to spending too much time over their words. And Southwell was the name of Mrs. Antony's first husband. Miss Dormer had said so, therefore there could be no mistake. And Dyson had been her name before she married at all. Then as for the Bettina which looked so pretty in

the papers when the third marriage was announced, well, a woman of Mrs. Antony's ingenuity could easily conjure it out of the more prosaic Elizabeth with which at her baptism she had been oppressed. One might as well be Bettina as Libbie, if a change was made at all.

Now, if they could only find out that this Libbie Dyson, the scullery-maid of Lowater Court, who had married a Mr. Southwell of Crumbleby, had after his death married a Mr. Dormer, a lieutenant in the —th, the evidence would be sufficiently conclusive that old Ben's daughter and the present Mrs. Antony of the Elms were one and the same person. And in that case the solicitor would be exceedingly sorry that he had said anything about stopping Ben's parish allowance.

However, Mrs. Antony was not the only person to be considered in the matter. The more Miss Pentwistle turned it over in her own mind, the more she became convinced that she had got hold of the right end of the clue. Mrs. Antony had been at the Court some time ago, either in a clairvoyant state, or, as Lady Lowater suggested, not suspecting the real facts, in a more material state. She must admit that all along she had had a suspicious feeling, Mrs. Antony had for a moment or two appeared so confused when surprise was expressed at her familiarity with the surroundings of the rock-seat. Her way of accounting for that familiarity, though romantic, was not satisfactory, Miss Dorner, who ought to have known all about her mother's magnetic susceptibilities, never having heard of them at all.

Then, for Mrs. Petipase's benefit, an entirely different story was produced. When that easily beguiled little woman expressed surprise at the ease with which a supposed stranger managed the intricacies of court-yard latches, Mrs. Antony explained that she had been staying in the house, of course leaving it to be implied that she was a guest there. Now, Lady Lowater distinctly said that to the best of her recollection no Mrs. Dormer or Mrs. Southwell had ever been entertained there, and visitors were so rare that their names were not easily forgotten. Moreover, Mrs. Antony had herself told Miss Pentwistle on a previous occasion that she was a perfect stranger in the neighbourhood, had never seen the place before, so that she was certainly convicted of falsehood, whatever else came to light.

What an opening out it would be, to be sure. Miss Pentwistle thought she need not now trouble herself seriously about the young baronet's matrimonial intentions. They would take care of themselves as soon as the facts of the case were known.

But she was a wise woman. She would not spoil everything by being over-eager to say what she knew. Indeed she determined to keep the whole affair quiet, and take her own revenge upon Mrs. Antony after her own fashion, when the evidence was complete.

Accordingly, when they were sitting at luncheon that morning, Sir Merrion not having yet made his appearance from the shooting expedition, she began, as though what she had to say was of the mildest importance.

'I met Mr. Rock this morning, and he

tells me that some inquiry is to be made about that girl, or woman as she is now, Libbie Dyson. Old Dyson's daughter, you know, who used to live here as scullery maid, and then went to Crumbleby and married some one above her own station.'

'Libbie Dyson. Oh! yes, I remember her,' and a tinge of sharpness came into my lady's manner, 'a giddy sort of a girl, with a pretty face and rather bold manners, just the one to attract some one a little above her, if the somebody did not happen to have many brains. And what of her?'

'Nothing, except that the poor-law guardians have decided that she ought to be made to support her poor old father. Shameful, is it not, that she should be living in ease and luxury whilst he is receiving five shillings a week from the parish? I call it a most abominable

misappropriation of the public funds.'

'Well, perhaps it is, but don't let us pass judgment upon it with such a wealth of syllables. And how are they going to inquire after her, and how do they know there is anything left of her to inquire about?'

'You mean how do they know whether she is living or not. Because, as I told Mr. Rock, those, clever, selfish, managing people never do die like the rest of us. They go on and prosper in satin and velvet and——'

Miss Pentwistle was about to add that they met with an unlimited succession of eligible husbands, but stopped in time, remembering the presence of Valence Dormer, who sat there more silent than was her wont, but still listening, for she was greatly interested in all that touched Ben Dyson's affairs. She had often heard Mar-

garet speak of this well-married sister.

‘Poor things, I am sorry for them if they never die,’ said Lady Lowater, carelessly. ‘It seems to me sometimes that dying is the only thing worth living for. But, taking it for granted that she is above ground, what then?’

‘She is to be made to support her father, and they have determined to discontinue his allowance. The poor man is dreadfully distressed about it, and says he would rather die than take a penny from her, but the parish authorities very naturally do not look upon it in that light. They say, and I think, justly, that the man must look to his own relatives for support.’

Lady Lowater helped herself to more strawberries. She was silent for a little while, playing with them. Then she said,

‘The parish authorities need not trouble their poor dear heads about it any more.’

They may drop Ben Dyson's five shillings a week as soon as they like, and I will pay it to him myself. I can quite understand the poor man's feelings. For myself, I would rather starve than take a crust of bread from an unwilling child. He has served the estate well these forty years, and I will see to it that he dies in peace.'

'Oh! my dear Lady Lowater, how kind of you! I never thought of such a thing as suggesting that you should come to his help in such a generous way. What a relief to the poor man!'

'Or rather to the poor parish authorities. So tell them, if you please, that there need be no inquiries made.

But this was not what Miss Pentwistle wished as a conclusion of the whole matter. Quite other things than the saving of the parish funds depended upon the discovery of Libbie Dyson's whereabouts.

‘I will tell Mr. Rock at once,’ she replied. ‘what a liberal offer you have made. At the same time, I do think the guardians will wish to proceed with the inquiries. You see, it would be a satisfaction to them.’

‘By all means, then, let them proceed as much as ever they like. But I think, when once their pockets are relieved,* they will not care to go to any further expense.’

‘It will not be any expense, dear Lady Lowater.’

‘Then, how are they going to set about it?’

‘Well, Mr. Rock suggested that, as I have friends* near Crumbleby, I should write and ask them to make inquiries. You see, as the girl was married from there, there will be a record in the parish registers.’

‘Yes, if she ever *was* married.’

'Oh! she was married. There is not a doubt of that. Both Ben Dyson and Margaret always spoke of that as certain. But I was thinking that, if I could have gone over myself to Crumbleby for a day or two. My friends the Miss Paskerleys have often asked me to pay them a little visit.'

'By all means, Miss Pentwistle,' said her ladyship, with great alacrity. 'Go whenever you like. I shall be delighted for you to have a holiday. How soon would you like to go?' .

'Thank you very much. I felt sure you would let me take a day or two. I thought perhaps very early next week, whilst Miss Dormer is still with you.'

Miss Pentwistle threw out this partly as a hint to the young lady herself that her visit ought to be supposed to be drawing to a conclusion, and partly to

find out from Lady Lowater, if possible, how long the girl really was going to stay. She meant to have her own plans arranged by the next garden-party, at which, of course, Mrs. Antony would be present, and she had already made up her mind how the revenge was to be accomplished. But she did not wish to pain Miss Dormer more than was necessary in the accomplishment of it. The poor girl would be sufficiently punished afterwards.

Valence, however, settled the matter by saying.

‘I do not think I shall be here next week, Miss Pentwistle.’

‘Not here next week!’ said Lady Lowater. ‘My dear child, what do you mean?’

‘I mean that I think I ought to go back to Hurchester at once.’

‘And I think you ought to do nothing

of the sort, Valence; so now be quiet. Miss Pentwistle, make your own plans. When would you like to go?’

‘Well, as I was saying, a few days next week would perhaps be as convenient as any other time.’

‘A few days? Nonsense! Take a fortnight, three weeks, a month if you like. You have not had a change for ever so long; and, as I shall have Merrion and Valence with me—at any rate, Valence, for Merrion talks of a visit or two—you need not fear that I shall be lonely.’

‘Then, shall I say even earlier than next week, Lady Lowater? You are really most kind.’

‘Go as early as ever you like, Miss Pentwistle, and stay as long as the change is doing you good. If anything requires your presence here, I will be sure to send for you.’

So Miss Pentwistle went away, to write to her friend Miss Paskerley, and propose that she should go over to Crumbleby on the following Monday, for a day or two, whilst the weather was so favourable for country visits. Not more than a day or two, though, in spite of Lady Lowater's kindness; for other journeys might need to be made before all the evidence was gathered up, and neither change for herself, nor any fear now that during her absence Valence and Sir Merriem would be thrown too much together, need weigh in the balance against the triumph which she proposed to achieve at the next Lowater Court garden-party.

END OF THE SECOND VOLUME.

